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Obituary | Dina Bangdel (1963–2017)

Kerry Lucinda Brown



(Kerry Lucinda Brown, 2012)

Dina Bangdel, Associate Professor and Director of the Art History program at Virginia Commonwealth University–Qatar, passed away on July 25, 2017 at the age of 53 from mucosa melanoma, a rare and aggressive form of cancer. Professor Bangdel was an internationally recognized scholar of South Asian and Himalayan art. The primary focus of her research was an examination of the development of Tantric Buddhist iconography in the Himalayas, with an emphasis on understanding the ritual and ideological functions of Newar Buddhist art in Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. Professor Bangdel was also interested in contemporary South Asian art, examining issues of gender and identity in contemporary art and film.

Born in Nepal in 1963, Dina was the only daughter of Lain Singh Bangdel, Nepal's preeminent modern artist and pioneering art historian, who served as Chancellor of the Royal Nepal Academy from 1979-1989. Lain and his

wife Manu, both originally from Darjeeling, arrived in Kathmandu in 1961 at the invitation of King Mahendra to establish a Modern art movement in Nepal. Dina grew up in a household filled with the constant stream of artists, poets, and filmmakers. Her early life was shaped by her father's study of art and architecture in the Kathmandu Valley; as Lain documented the artistic treasures of Nepal, Dina was typically by his side. From a very early age she explored the diverse visual and ritual culture of the communities that surrounded her, from Hindu temple complexes to Buddhist monastic courtyards to the street shrines that dotted the urban landscape of the Kathmandu Valley. This early exposure laid the foundation for what would ultimately become her life's work, researching the art and ritual culture of Nepal. But there is also no denying that Dina's interest in modern and contemporary art was fostered by her upbringing, surrounded by the work of her father, his friends and their colleagues.

Bangdel came to the United States in 1985 to study at Bryn Mawr College, graduating with her Bachelor's in Art History. She continued her study of South Asian art and culture in graduate school, earning an MA in South Asian Studies from the University of Wisconsin, and her PhD in Art History from The Ohio State University in 1999 under the direction of John and Susan Huntington. Bangdel's dissertation, "Manifesting the Mandala: A Study of the Core Iconographic Program of Newar Buddhist Monasteries in Nepal," was based on years of field research in the Kathmandu Valley. This work uncovered the central iconographic features of Buddhist monasteries in the Kathmandu Valley and still serves as a foundational, encyclopedic tome for scholars of Newar Buddhist art, architecture, and ritual culture.

After completing her PhD, Dina taught at Western Michigan University and The Ohio State University before coming to Virginia Commonwealth University in 2005. Through her mentorship and teaching, Dina provided students with the tools for success regardless of their background. Many people in education today speak about the power of grit and fostering a growth mindset as the keys to academic success. Dina was no different, though she encouraged students to start where they were and grow from there. She understood that overcoming struggle was part of what made success so rewarding. During her tenure as Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Art History at VCU and later as Director of Art History at VCU-Qatar, Dina was known for encouraging the academic and professional development of all students in the department. Further, she encouraged all students to cultivate strong academic portfolios, while working with them to find resources to travel to conferences, write competitive fellowship applications, and submit articles for publication.

In the seventeen years I knew Dina, she pushed me to improve my work, challenged my thinking, and encouraged me to take risks as a scholar, all while offering positive, constructive criticism as we planned my academic and professional career. Over the years I worked and conducted fieldwork together with Dina in Nepal, there were inexplicable moments of good fortune; times we found ourselves in the right place at the right time. Researching in Nepal meant I had to learn to accept that the right place and the right time wasn't fixed, something Dina often teased me about. Sometimes there were moments that could not be planned or scheduled, obstacles that were not anticipated, but by remaining fluid during these moments, Dina taught me to navigate those hurdles.

Throughout her too-short but illustrious career, Dina made notable contributions to the study of South Asian and Himalayan art, publishing numerous articles covering topics from Tantric Buddhist iconography to Nepalese contemporary art. Her books and edited volumes include *Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art*, with John C. Huntington (2003, a finalist for the 2005 Alfred J. Barr Award for best exhibition catalogue); *Sculpture of King Jayavarma and the Varma Dynasty of Nepal*, editor (2005); *Against the Current: The Life of Lain Singh Bangdel, Writer, Painter, and Art Historian of Nepal*, with Don Messerschmidt (2006); *Pilgrimage and Faith: Buddhism, Christianity and Islam*, with Virginia Raguin (2010); *Outside the Nation: Memoirs of a Nepalese Artist in Paris 1952-6*, editor (Nepali, 2010, Awarded Book of the Year Award by the Ministry of Education, Nepal); *Jewels of Newar Art* (2011); *Embodied Enlightenment*, with Samundra Man Singh Shrestha (2016); and *Birds of Nepal: The Art of Hira Lal Dangol and His Family Legacy* (2017).

Her later scholarship addressed issues of gender, performance, and the politics of identity in South Asian modern and contemporary art. In recent years, she was actively engaged in organizing exhibitions that brought attention to the work of Modernist artists working in Nepal today. Since 2010 she served on the Board of Directors of the Nepal Art Council (NAC), and her efforts were instrumental in fostering the NAC's debut appearance at the India Art Fair in New Delhi in 2016. Dina served as curator for the Nepal Art Council booth in 2016 and 2017, bringing international attention to contemporary Nepali art in the broader context of South Asian visual art. Before her death, she also curated a showcase exhibition for the Kathmandu Triennale (March 24–April 9, 2017). Her showcase, "City/Home: Built/Unbuilt," was a collaboration between Nepali-based artists and Qatar-based artists to explore issues of belonging, migration, memory, and identity in the context of city and place.

Dina Bangdel will be remembered as a brilliant scholar and cherished colleague. She was a dedicated teacher and mentor, not only to her undergraduate and graduate advisees, but to Nepali artists, scholars, and politicians alike. Anyone working with Dina was inspired by her energy and passion. More importantly, for those working to elevate the artistic and cultural heritage of Nepal on the world stage, Dina's confidence in Nepal and the Nepalese people was infectious. Her dedication to her country, its people and their rich cultural heritage will continue to inspire students and scholars in Nepal and abroad. Dina's sudden and unexpected death left several

projects unfinished. Her memory remains alive by all who loved her, and with those that now continue the projects she started. For all those who knew her and loved her, Dina's loss is still a shock. Dina was a devoted wife and mother, leaving behind her husband, Bibhakar Shakya and their two sons, Deven and Neal. Dina is also survived by her mother, Manu, who remains at their family home in Sanepa. Her legacy will continue on in their memory, in addition to the memories of all those she touched.

Kerry Lucinda Brown received her PhD in Art Historical Studies from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2014, specializing in South Asian and Himalayan art, under the direction of Dina Bangdel. Dr. Brown's research explores the relationship between art and ritual in defining ethnic identity in the Kathmandu Valley. She currently serves as Adjunct Assistant Professor of Asian Studies at Randolph-Macon College and Adjunct Assistant Professor of Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University. Since 2011 she has been engaged by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia as a museum educator and statewide speaker on the arts.