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Gallery Sketchbook | Shashi Bikram Shah

With a career spanning nearly five decades, **Shashi Bikram Shah** is a preeminent and well-respected contemporary artist in Nepal. In the 1960's, while studying at the Sir J.J. School of Art in Bombay, Shah was introduced to Impressionism and Surrealism. The influence of these movements are still evident in Shah's paintings, which aim to capture the world's suffering. His works have received numerous national awards, have been exhibited in more than ten countries, and are included in many public and private collections worldwide.

Shashi Shah's signature image has been that of the horse. Often equated with Vishnu's Kalki avatar, the horse is a metaphor for Kali Yuga, the present era of humanity according to Hindu tradition—a time characterized by spiritual degeneration, loss of life, and moral degradation. Kalki is also the last of the ten incarnations of Vishnu, the protector and preserver in Hinduism. Shah's paintings often reference other incarnations that have safeguarded humans, such as the Buddha and Narasimha, in order to express the potential for deliverance even during moments of despair.

While Shah's surrealist imagery is rooted in Hindu motifs, they equally draw upon contemporary phenomena of economic inequality, war, and terrorism; consequently, the horse is a politically salient metaphor that expresses the continuity of suffering alongside salvation. The versatility of this metaphor parallels the flexibility of Shah's art forms, which include paintings, drawings, and sculptures. Shah does not want his

works to be limited to themes of sorrow, in the artist's own words, "I believe long descriptions of the visual arts eventually belittle the art's true value. A work of art is sufficient in its own right and should speak for itself. There is no need for descriptions." Shah thus persistently encourages viewers of his work to associate their own meanings and values with the images he has created.

This gallery sketchbook includes some of Shah's more recent paintings, as well as drawings and sketches from his personal collection, which are being published for the first time. These images highlight Shah's skill in the art of caricature, particularly of himself. He has been developing this skill since his childhood doodling days. In his personal diaries, Shah usually draws a series of self-portraits that portray him as, or with, historic figures such as Lenin, Gandhi, and Jung Bahadur Rana. Such caricatures not only serve as an exercise in absurdity, humor, and self-reflection, but also act as a commentary on our shared human history and the role of an artist in shaping this history. In essence, his series of self-portraits capture the metaphysical links between humans and the ways we directly and indirectly influence each other's experiences of joy and suffering in this world.

The author of this text, **Priyankar Bahadur Chand**, recently graduated from Yale University with a dual B.A. in Anthropology and Global Affairs. He is the eldest grandson of the artist and is currently working in Nepal. All images are published with permission from the artist.

Horse sculpture detail, mixed media, 2016.



Mood of Horses, ink on paper, 13 x 21 cm, 2015.



The Joker, ink on paper, 13 x 21 cm, 2015.



Seven Headed Horse, acrylic on canvas, 132 x 102 cm, 2016.



Detail from *Horses on a Line*, acrylic on canvas, 214 x 117 cm, work in progress.

Old Man, oil on canvas, 56 x 71 cm, 2014.





Shashi as Jung Bahadur Rana - 1, ink on paper, 13 x 21 cm, 2015.