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# The Flying Nagas

Maureen Drdak

In the quotidian life of Nepal, modernity's speed and impact weigh heavily upon an older world, thinning the membrane between sacred and profane. Though still strongly tethered to the divine, Nepal struggles to maintain equilibrium. Within this oscillating culture-scape lies the ancient city of Patan, or Lalitpur, the seat of Nepal's traditional fine arts. Among these arts, the endangered practice of Newari repoussé metalwork—an art in which sheet metal is hammered from both sides to produce three-dimensional form—deservedly holds a special place. As noted by Nepal arts scholar Mary Slusser, repoussé has been described as an “art of the cognoscenti,”<sup>1</sup> and indeed, the unique challenges of this material practice are formidable, greatly surpassing in difficulty the practice of lost-wax casting. The unfortunate evidence of the elite nature of repoussé is the ever-dwindling numbers of practitioners—of even middling stature. Though its tools and techniques are disarmingly simple, one is quickly apprised of the level of skill and talent required to raise the Beautiful Form.

Clive Bell, seminal art critic and proponent of formalism in aesthetics, spoke about the ability of form to evoke an aesthetic emotion within the viewer—the flow of sensorial responses and correlated associations immediately induced by a visual phenomenon. For me the opulent forms of repoussé that grace the high architecture of the Valley immediately elicited an association with painting—their sumptuous surfaces bathed in opulent patinas and highlighted by flickering tissues of eroded gilding. It was this allusion, together with my astonishment at the transformative ferocity of modernity on Nepal's culture and environment, which led to my vision of a synthesis of Newari repoussé and contemporary painting—and *The Prakriti Project*, my 2011–2012 Fulbright work in Nepal.

Bell also spoke of form's protean capacity for generating psychological and cross-cultural insights. The most potent forms become universal symbols, and the ability of the most effective of these signifiers to deeply resonate with the viewer remains undiminished by time. As visual reminders of communal values such symbols can reinvigorate, inspire, and instruct communities, especially in times of cultural dislocation and environmental stress. In the Kathmandu Valley the *Naga* (serpent deity) is the *sine qua non* of cultural symbols; as a living protector deity, it is uniquely equipped to speak to Nepal's chaotic present (Drdak 2013). Intimately associated with the health of the environment, the *Naga*'s elegant and dynamic form winds protectively through the Kathmandu Valley's art and culture. As a constant reminder of the Valley's physical and spiritual dependency upon water, it offers a collective and contemplative point of departure for generating ecological activism and redress of environmental damage. Perhaps the most glittering expression of the *Naga*'s protective guardianship is the Royal Throne of Patan, in which the immense gilded repoussé mass of the serpent rises up to support the monarch who rules beneath its gaze, as it once sheltered the meditating Siddhartha Gautama of the Shakyas, the imminent Buddha. These aspects of the *Naga* determined its selection as my *vahana* or 'vehicle' for my statement work for *The Prakriti Project*—the painting diptych, *The Flying Nagas*.

*The Flying Nagas* speak to cultural dislocation and environmental degradation in Nepal. The *Naga* is a chthonic power bestowing blessing and punishment; when pollution comes, the Nagas leave. As living deities, the *Nagas* are believed to have a capacity to absorb pollution, but if abused will withdraw bringing drought and disease in their wake; reflecting upon the potential consequences of abuse

of water resources within the Valley, this belief cannot be viewed solely as poetic metaphor. Indeed, considering the tragic condition of Nepal's sacred rivers, it raises salient questions about modernity's values and their impact on cultures for which the sacral value of water is primary for cultural identity. These portentous aspects of the *Naga* are prefigured in *The Flying Nagas*; swirling black plastic bags—pernicious pollutant of the Kathmandu Valley—enmesh the rising and writhing bodies of the great serpents in an ominous whirlwind impeding their flight as they attempt to flee a fouled and heated environment. Black torrents of crushed stone, symbolic of fouled waters, cascade from their torn bodies, their gilded skin streams in tatters. Their condition references the erosion of the indigenous cultural values that once sustained them and the earth. Their suffering is that of the environment—choked, mute and breathless.

*The Flying Nagas* displays three forms of Newari repoussé techniques: free-hammering, *thwajya* (embossing) and *katanjya* (embroidery). As its name implies, free hammering allows for the free use of hammers on sheet metal—frequently without the *khaloo* (anvil)—to create form. I employed free-hammering to create the fluid and naturalistic aspects of the Nagas. As the Newars view this technique mostly as a prelude to controlled embossing—it is generally relegated to roughing-out forms—my deliberate and predominant use of it to articulate in detail the form of the Nagas elicited intense interest within the atelier. Newars follow strict a canonical vocabulary of forms, especially for religious icons, which permits minimal variation and less experimentation. My freely evolving interpretation of my concept sketches and unorthodox application of the hammers elicited reactions progressing through skepticism, amusement, bewilderment, and ultimately fascination and delight. And with the introduction of plastic bags into the work—in unholy proximity to the *Nagas*' opulent fire-gilded skin—jaws collectively dropped.

The ancient practice of fire-gilding is highly coveted for its ability to lay down a very thick layer of gold. It is also highly controversial; its release of mercury from its amalgam matrix during the process largely precludes its practice in the contemporary developed world where it is chiefly reserved for the selective restoration of art objects in museum collections. However, fire-gilding is still widely practiced in the Kathmandu Valley where its heavy application of gold is held to be solely suitable and highly desirable for sacral forms and the secret recipes for preparation of its amalgam are jealously guarded. Unfortunately, its practice in Nepal lacks the environmental emissions oversight standards mandated in the West. After much soul-search-

ing in view of these conflicting considerations—reminded of the *Naga*'s stature as a living deity for Nepalis, and after seeking responsible council—I decided to proceed with its limited use in *The Flying Nagas*.

As the above dilemma illustrated, art research and production in Nepal presented many challenges—especially within the constraints of a six-month period. My work was conducted alternately in my studio within the Patan Museum as Kathmandu Contemporary Art Centre Artist-in-Residence, and in the repoussé atelier of my guru, Rabindra Shakya. In the Patan Museum studio—where initial concept design and final repoussé assembly with painting were completed—particulates were a constant concern; windows were without screening, and dust after the monsoon's abatement was a constant presence. Temperature fluctuations were another. The last phase of my work had to wait until the repoussé elements were completed; this put the temperature-sensitive phase of work during the height of the winter season when frigid air, tumbling down from the mountains, caused night temperatures to plummet. The lack of overnight heating in my studio threatened the effective curing and stability of acrylic medium and paint. Yet art production in Nepal offers unique rewards—indeed, when reflecting upon the magnificent environs of the Museum in which I was privileged to work, these difficulties were a trifling price to pay.

The *Nagas* took form in the repoussé atelier of Rabindra's family—a physically demanding yet highly contemplative world in which artist and material bend to serve the divine. It is also sonic world in which the range and quality of sound emitted by hammers, chains, and roaring fires verged on the symphonic; booming percussive bursts, ringing staccato flurries and delicate tinkling ornamentations rise and fall, supporting the intense concentration of the artisans, drawing all into a form of *kinhin*, mediation through action. The physicality of Newari repoussé practice is underappreciated; deceptively simple, the techniques are extremely demanding and can be physically punishing. Desire, strength and dexterity must be wedded to a fine aesthetic sensibility, even in the most basic artisan. Working metal on metal is unforgiving of mistakes, demanding hard-won skill and intense concentration. The strength required to support with one hand the considerable weight of often large sheets of sixteen- to eighteen-gauge sheet copper, while continuously adjusting its position on the anvil, and simultaneously wielding with equal precision the hammer with the other hand—executing both movements in concert—is difficult to convey. It can only be experienced to appreciate its rigors. A master makes it look deceptively simple—even effortless. Yet it

presents unique haptic challenges. One must ‘see’ through the copper sheet to the anvil head beneath and ‘feel’ where and how the blow will fall. Only long experience secures the knowledge of which felicitous combination of *twa* (anvil terminus) and *mugha* (hammer) will produce the desired form, and indeed, the value of these tools—hand-made by Nepal’s diminishing number of ironworkers to the master’s inventive and exacting specifications—is such that a day is set aside solely for their worship. It was for me high honor indeed when Rabindra presented me with a set of Newari repoussé tools—made expressly for me—in recognition of his respect for my work and commitment.

As *The Prakriti Project* evidenced the potential of repoussé for dynamic new expressive applications, it also illuminated its master practitioners. As a result of Nepal’s historic seclusion the unique traditions and practices of this elite art have been available for study by foreigners for less than sixty years. The lineage of Rabindra Shakya includes artists and scholars patronized and decorated by the Malla and Shah Kings, and commissioned by Buddhist leaders (Slusser and Giambrone 2001). It is traceable back to Abhaya Raj Shakya, founder of the Mahabouddha Temple in 1564; members of my teacher’s family still serve as priests to this temple. As scions of the famed repoussé master Kuber Singh Shakya the family continues the legacy of their illustrious ancestry. Rabindra, aided by younger brother Rajendra, is master of both diminutive and colossal form. Raj Kumar, Rabindra’s elder brother, recently completed the creation of a repoussé colossus of the Buddhist saint Padmasambhava in remote Takela, Bhutan—at one hundred and fifteen feet in height, it is second only in height to Frederic Bartholdi’s Statue of Liberty. Despite the increase in commissions in recent years, primarily from religious patrons outside Nepal, Raj Kumar Shakya expresses concern for its future; the demanding nature of repoussé, the diminished interest of the younger generation in this practice; growing Western influences and social change are all challenges to its survival. By Rabindra’s recollection, their family atelier has seen only four foreign students; I am the only one (and only woman) to have extended my study and attained a degree of proficiency.

*The Flying Nagas* speak to synthesis and regeneration. A monumental work of diptych form with a total overall dimension of 183 by 183 centimeters, *The Flying Nagas* was exhibited at Siddhartha Art Gallery in Kathmandu in February 2012, along with the work of Rabindra Shakya as a celebration of the linkage between master and student, traditional legacy and contemporary form. Referring to *The Flying Nagas* as “astonishing paintings,” Dr. Mary Slusser described my work with Master Rabindra Shakya

as a “fecund collaboration” and “an inspired coupling apparently without antecedents.”<sup>1</sup> Truly, my friendship with guru Rabindra and his venerable family remains my great privilege and personal treasure. The survival of Newari repoussé, however, remains uncertain—in this it mirrors the larger issue of cultural erosion and environmental degradation in Nepal and the Himalayan region. Expressing deep love for their native arts, Nepalis of all ages and professions with whom I spoke revealed awareness and apprehension of both cultural and environmental loss—and a growing appreciation of their interconnection. Both portent and affirmation, *The Flying Nagas* speaks to the relationship between *purusha* and *prakriti*—spirit and matter—man and the environment—and to the critical importance of the harmonious restoration and preservation of that relationship, and its regenerative potential.

**Maureen Drdak** is a graduate of the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She is the recipient of numerous honors, including the 2011-2012 U.S. Fulbright Senior Scholar Award for Nepal. Her previous work *Lung-Ta*—an interdisciplinary collaborative with international composer Dr. Andrea Clearfield inspired by the Kingdom of Lo in Nepal's Mustang District—enjoyed premieres in Philadelphia and Chicago. Her work is found in numerous collections, among them Asian art collectors Berthe and John Ford and Shelley and Donald Rubin. Her exhibition history includes numerous solo exhibitions and international arts festivals; she lectures at museum and academic venues by invitation. Drdak is currently the President of the Fellowship of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts.

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### Endnote

1. Slusser, Mary. "The Art of Rabindra Shakya and Maureen Drdak: An Appreciation," *The Prakriti Project: Eternal Visions—Contemporary Forms*, Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, Kathmandu, Nepal, February 2012.

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