

ARTREE NEPAL ARTIST COLLECTIVE PROJECT AT NIRIN, SYDNEY'S 22ND BIENNALE

Julia Booth

Since its inception in 1973, the Biennale of Sydney has showcased the work of nearly 1,800 artists from more than 100 countries and holds an important place on both the national and international stage. Alongside the Venice and São Paulo biennales and documenta, it is one of the longest running periodic exhibitions around the globe. This year the 22nd Biennale of Sydney NIRIN hosted artists from Nepal for the first time. Artree Nepal Artist Collective's project *Not less expensive than gold* was selected.

Artree Nepal is an artist collective formed in 2013. The founding members Sheelasha Rajbhandari, Hit Man Gurung, Mekh Limbu, Subas Tamang and Lavkant Chaudhary come from a range of different indigenous communities of Nepal. Hit Man Gurung says: 'there are between 59 - 70 indigenous groups in Nepal, the figures differ between the government statistics and the reality but we can certainly say there are more than 60 indigenous groups and 124 different languages'. Sadly, many of these languages are dying out, the result of government policy initiated in the 1960's to discourage indigenous language and enforce the use of the dominant Nepali. From 1990 the use of indigenous language was prohibited.

Members of the Artree collective met in art school in Kathmandu. Each specialises in a different field: painting, sculpture, print making and photography. They have worked for years to develop improved infrastructure and education of art in Nepal, promoting undergraduate and post graduate work in fine arts as well as developing international exchanges between contemporary artists. Artree uses public spaces to engage with a wider audience and challenge the status quo, aiming to be a strong catalyst for change by arousing social consciousness.

Artree practices art with the belief that it has deep roots in social practice. The mainstream narrative of Nepal and its surrounding region has excluded the stories and experiences of numerous underprivileged and indigenous communities. Artree's collective and individual practices draw attention to these problematic social hierarchies and invasive international influences.

Artree's Sydney 2020 Biennale work *Not less expensive than gold* is a multimedia installation

NOT LESS EXPENSIVE THAN GOLD 2020, ARTREE NEPAL, INSTALLATION VIEW FOR THE 22ND BIENNALE OF SYDNEY (2020), COCKATOO ISLAND. COMMISSIONED BY THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS. COURTESY THE ARTISTS. PHOTOGRAPH: ALI NEWLING



- a combination of sculpture, video, drawings, documents and herbs that responds to the commercialisation and corruption of the health system. The objects express the frustration of erasure and disintegration of indigenous ethnic, communal and shamanistic medicinal and healing practices in Nepal. As a collective, each work in the installation is created collaboratively.

The two video works document a performance piece representing solidarity with Dr Govinda KC, a surgeon and activist who has undertaken hunger strikes and lobbied government to provide a decentralized, public, accessible health system including better access to medical education in Nepal.

The artists shaved their head as a symbol of mourning and painted, in the Nepalese language (Devanāgarī script) on their bodies, the manifesto written by Dr Govind KC protesting against the corruption of the health system. With eyes closed and supported by family members and friends, the performers walked silently and slowly for 4 km in 4

hours to the Kathmandu Parliament. Around 10,000 people gathered to support the protest. Despite the effectiveness of the protest and the government agreeing to the demands, nothing concrete transpired. The second video work documents the consequent response to the lack of action: the artists swathed in bandages sat outside the parliament, again a huge crowd gathered and in this instance they could write their concerns and complaints about the lack of available health care on the bandages.

A series of 20 drawings of the herbs most used in indigenous health care is beautifully executed in a stipple style of ink drawing reminiscent of a 19th century botanical encyclopedia. They are labelled with their Latin botanical, English and indigenous names, underlining the fact that these plants have been used by Nepalese indigenous communities for thousands of years and are an essential part of their culture.

The re-creation of a typical herb shop provides a sensory component to the installation.



All the herbs are dried and set up exactly as they would be in Kathmandu. This is in stark contrast to the principal focus of the installation - a glass cabinet stacked with a thousand pieces each of a variety of medicine bottles and bubble packs of pills found in Western pharmaceuticals. Each piece has been individually sculpted with papermâché made from toilet paper and then gilded with imitation gold leaf.

The juxtaposition of the herbs and the dazzling expensive pharmaceuticals explicitly illustrates the irony that the medicinal plants which people have used for thousands of years have now become export goods while presently 80-90% of the drugs used by locals are imported. The climatic, topographical and ecological variation in Nepal provides a wide range of rich medicinal aromatic plants. The herbs found at 3,000 metres and above are considered rich in natural chemicals and are prized by many in the world. Increasingly, as in many developing countries, the basic needs of health, education and transportation are being commercialised. As a result, adequate health services and medical education are prohibitively expensive.

Due to a lack of proper infrastructure and qualified medical staff, people have to travel to the capital for even basic treatment. This installation is an act of protest and a reflection of the injustice of this system.

The photographs included in the installation detail the various shamanistic practices related to healing in indigenous Bon culture. Images of hands hold the precious medicinal herbs. Sheelasha says: 'When we were kids we used to go to the local herbalist doctor, this has all now changed and plants are becoming the properties of companies and the traditional practices are dying out'.

The grassroots art scene in Kathmandu is lively and there are signs that international interest in contemporary Nepalese art is getting stronger. Perhaps the strongest indicator of this is the Katmandu Triennale whose 2020 edition is being curated by Arttree's Sheelasha Rajbhandari and Hit Man Gurung working in conjunction with Cosmic Costinas, Artistic Director of Para Site gallery, Hong Kong. With over 40 countries and 100 artists represented from around the world, Kathmandu Triennale will explore themes relating to migration and displacement, indigenous knowledge, pluralism and the multiplicity of worldview from an Asian perspective, discourses on decolonisation and redefining the parameters of art beyond a western cannon.

The Arttree collective is leading the movement in Nepal to develop art and expression through their collective, employing a range of methods to broaden the concept of how people perceive art.

In their own words from members of the collective:

'There are a lot of practices that have been marginalised and not considered art, some of them have been practicing for hundreds if not thousand of years, and there is also a lot of art activism happening a lot of feminist activism happening that we would like to see as part of contemporary art practice'.

'For us the Triennale if we look in a micro detail way, it is more political, that is why Nepal has not has been part of the global art conversation, from the global art scene it is very small but if we look from the local prospect there is always something happening, it is different in the way we perceive it. It is difficult to continue our art practice without government or institutional



support but with the collective support art practice can thrive'. ((pers. comm. with Hit Man Gurung).

'We have a collective space a collective studio, also financially we share everything if someone is not earning we share everything, all of us are skilled in different things so we do not have to outsource things so we can do ourselves, also we are very good friends with activists, other artists, poets, we share resources with each other. We are open for idea exchanges'.

Arttree exhibited as part of the Sydney Biennale 2020 from 14 March 2020 on Cockatoo Island. However due to the current pandemic the Biennale is showing its NIRIN exhibitions online at www.biennaleofsydney.art. Members of Arttree Nepal have exhibited their works in The Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, Australia; Dhaka Art Summit, Dhaka; Yinchuan Biennale; China, Kathmandu Triennale of Contemporary Art; *Nepal Art Now* at Welt Museum Wien, Austria and the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. Hit Man and Sheelasha have a strong personal association with Australia. In 2014 Hit Man received an Australian Himalayan Foundation Art Award, which provides assistance to emerging Nepalese artists.

Julia Booth is a Director of the Australian Himalayan Foundation with a long history of work in the Himalayas, specializing in Bhutan. She is passionate about the promotion of contemporary art in the region. Julia is finishing her first book *SHE - The Story of Indira, Maharani of Cooch Behar*.

All quotations from Arttree artists in this article are taken from interviews with the author when they were in Australia.