

ASHOK PATEL

1981-1991 SCULPTURES

Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay

Oct. 2-8, 1991 11 am — 7 pm

ASHOK PATEL

- 1963 Born in Padra, Gujarat
- 1979-83 Diploma in Sculpture, Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda
- 1981 Light Music-Vocal Course, Music College, M.S. University, Baroda
- 1983-85 Post Diploma in Creative Sculpture, Fine Arts, M.S. University, Baroda
- 1984 Joined Kathak for one year in Music College, M.S. University, Baroda
- 1986 Attended Terracotta Camp, organised by Lalit Kala Akademy, Delhi, in Bankura, West Bengal, on the birth place of Ram Kinker
- 1989-90 Worked with Textile Designer for the project innovation of traditional woven textile design of Gujarat
- 1990 Organised 'Nisarganand' the Undergraduate Sculptors Camp to create possibility to work with nature in an open place like farm at Ranu, small village near Baroda.

Awards:

- 1983, 90 Lalit Kala (Gujarat) Award for Bronze Sculpture

Address:

Phoolbaug, PADRA-391 440, Dist. Baroda

OF THE WALLS THE INNER BEING BUILDS

A metaphysical position appropriated and asserted through art can lead to esoteric obscurities and hence exclude the onlooker from the 'World' of the artist. My attempts at disrupting and positively affecting such a situation with Ashok, since more than a decade now, has left me with utter dissolution and the situation still remains unchanged. Hence, initially it seemed to be an impossibility when he mentioned to me to write on his works, yet, I remain now drawn, to the task, essentially due to the challenge it offers in suggesting a critical perspective. Ashok's artistic endeavour can not be considered in simplistic terms as it borders upon many realms of perennial and contextual realities and truths, concerning meaning and functions of 'Art' and life, to the individual and the society. Though being 'unique' in many respects, Ashok's art frustrates, irks and at times even bores me terribly. Apart from the strangeness, if there is something more that has attracted me into his art activity, it is the rigorous single minded involvement within himself. If this has any specific relevance and validity to the world at large, particularly in the context of the Post-modern eclecticism and internationalism and the negation of 'uniqueness' as a value of not much consequence, the case of Ashok is a pointer to a mammoth art world in the country, distinct from the most avant-grade artist/intellectual group(s).

Continuously drawing his sources from the mysterious recesses of the mind and constantly reflecting upon them so as to yearn for a state of spiritual purification of the self, the making, breaking and re-casting, according to the artist is a continuous process of cleansing the inner demonic darkness. The human body and the physicality of it for him, is more than or less than itself, in the sense that the function of it is to realize higher spiritual experiences. Uninhibited in engaging the body and allowing the materiality of life to act its own course upon it, the 'body' for Ashok is merely an instrument to be 'used', much like discarding the boat, its memory and the co-travellers after crossing the waters. The living and the physicality of life to him are thus incidental and leave him unattached. His artistic endeavours however are more than simply delineating and exemplifying these philosophical ideas about living.

The self absorbing process of purifying is in conjunction with the world around-family, friends or society in general. Ashok defines his artistic vocation primarily as a 'wall' against the world. The closing in or the encasement of the self into an inner world of existence and the process of 'unmasking' within, thus is double edged. An affirmation of the ontological freedom to be what one is as well as a resistance against what one is not.

Bringing the human figure at the centre of his sculptural language becomes an attempt to transcend it. The schematic geomatric abstraction of the kind tantric art employs could have been an alternative, but Ashok avoids this. This was inevitable because spirituality to him is in the transubstantiation of the physical. This conviction is rooted in his life experience of renouncing his paternal home as a boy in

search of spiritual realization, who soon returned to put in practice the discovery that the spiritual ascent is possible only by an emptying of the physicality through living life with all its day to day involvements and the mundane ebb and flow.

Denouncing self-consciousness and deliberation in sculpting and drawing, he merely allows the forms to 'happen'. As a result of such a process of automatism, human figuration assumes transfiguration, distortions and convolutions far removed from their natural appearances. The emaciated and displaced human bodies devoid of their muscular and bone structure still maintain their organic dispositions — creeping, stretching, coiling, growing and heaving. They become weird organisms with hands and feet like tentacles, moving in wavy rhythms, or like roots in search of life sustaining sources or forms rising above in a flight of freedom. These are in conjunction with images such as pots, snakes and birds, which work as symbols. According to Ashok a pot for instance is symbolic of the human body and from its unfathomable depths the emerging flight of a bird connotes purity and freedom. Ashok traces the origin of such symbology to the memories of his childhood experiences of watching with awe and wonder the fluttering flights of birds from the mysterious darkness of the deep wells at his paternal farm in the village. The coiling snake too functions as a metaphor according to him, alternatively as per the context in which they are used, symbolising life and death.

The surreal alignments of the different parts of the human figure and the distortions in them are far removed from normal life experiences. However so, this process of transforming from natural appearances to fantastic, to me is ghastly, perverted and mesochistic, though for Ashok, these are not meant to be so. One of the most important aspects about his art in this context is that there is absolutely no place for the onlooker in his relationship to his art practice.

Living in the midst of the whirlpools of constant disharmonies through childhood, adolescence and manhood, amidst the pulling, pushing, demoralizing and disquieting realities, Ashok is resentful to the normal modes of adjustments in life and relationships. Instead, he has imposed an exile for himself from the oppressive. Art for him is a wall of self assertion.

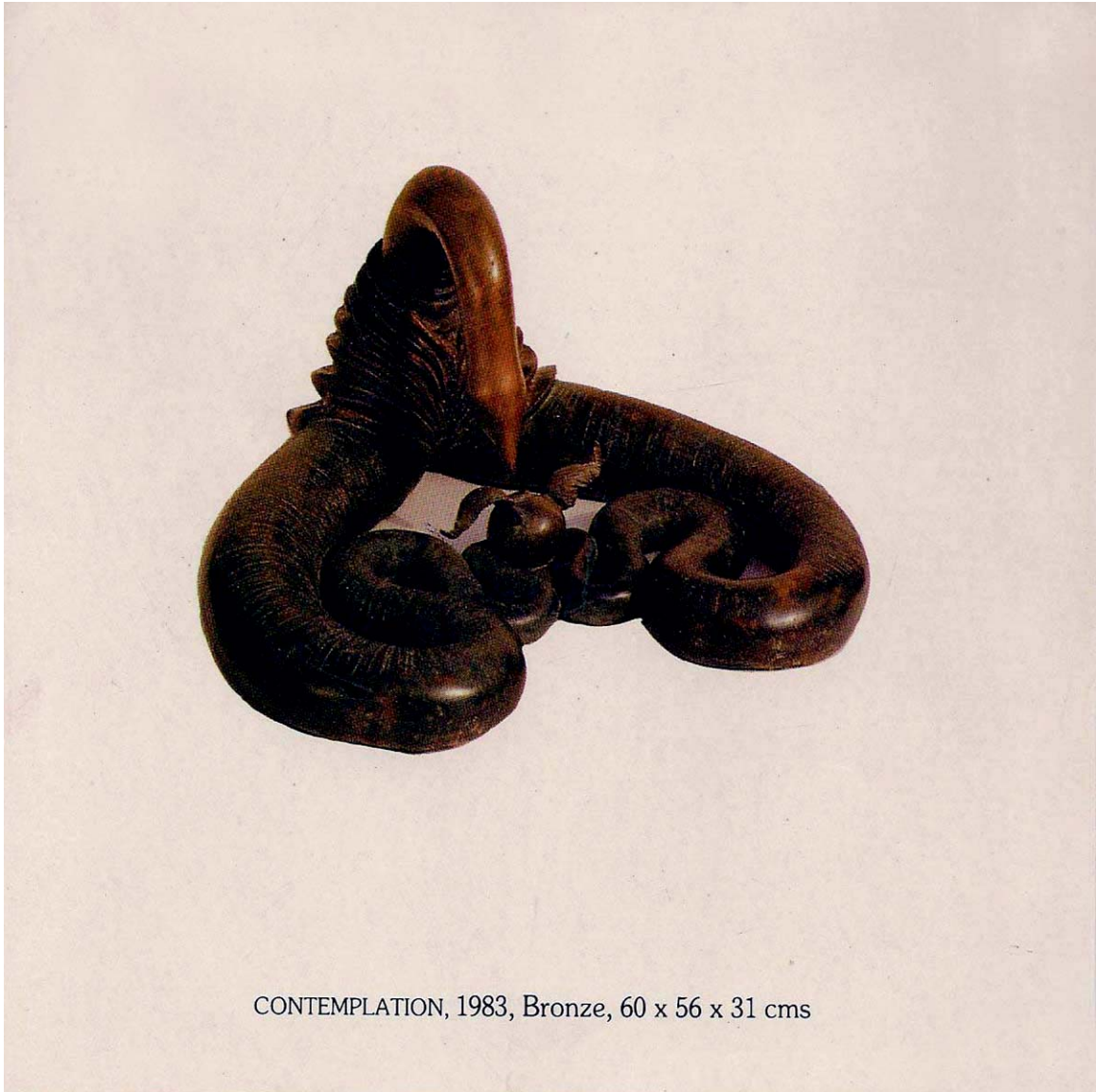
I am thankful to Rekha Rodwittiya, Surendran Nair and Sailaja Shivaji for giving critical comments and suggestions on the different drafts of this essay.

Baroda
August, 1991

Dr. Shivaji K. Panikkar



A DECADE INTERRELATIONSHIP, 1981-91, Sandstone, 53 x 133 x 42 cms



CONTEMPLATION, 1983, Bronze, 60 x 56 x 31 cms