



*Never alone
But together*

The Drawings and Sculptures of Ashok Patel
August - September 2008



Front cover: 'The Cosmos Flowering ' (2006), pencil on paper, 10.5 x 10"

Back cover : 'A river keeps on flowing within' (2008), pencil on paper, 13 x 11"

Inside cover: 'The Eternal River' (2008), pencil on paper, 11 x 13"

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The Drawings and Sculptures of **Ashok Patel**
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To Zimakesar

with lots of love

Ashok



'The ritual between us' (2008), pencil on paper, 14 x 11"

THE DRAWINGS OF ASHOK PATEL

Perhaps the greatest curse of modernity is distrust. Distrust of society, family and community, political distrust, distrust of authority or religious figurehead but most of all distrust of ourselves. In society this has caused scepticism, in religion secularism or atheism, in ourselves negativity, paranoia and insecurity. We do not like being preached to. As much as the Western artist has been a rebel against the status quo, more often the artist has assumed the role of the subtle teacher, discreet indoctrinator, social, religious or political enhancer. Often art has been described as good for the spiritual health of the people. In this way our art and our soul has been constantly intertwined.

In India, art has galvanised spiritual growth for more than a thousand years at least. However, as India turns toward a future that reflects a Western modernity, the spiritual aspect of art has taken a sharp decline and artwork of fickle fashion is, for the most part, the order of the day. Perhaps an altogether brasher art with an easily recognisable message seems to most reflect modern Indian life. One worries whether Indian contemporary art is ready to give up yet on its spiritual heritage and move in this direction with such aggression and speed as it has shown so far.

Ashok Patel stands in quiet, though stark, contrast to this popular, what he would call, (in its broadest sense) 'ugly' art. His work returns us to the spiritual core of India. It leaves aside religion (which, to Ashok, has now combined with the same 'ugliness' of modern society) and concentrates on the enhancement of the soul. Normally such work would cause us to shudder with distrust and irritation. We do not like being preached to, as I have said. However, the work is so austere and honest, so much about the inarticulate nature of being swept away with innate happiness (a contentment we all deep down desire), that one cannot help but listen and hope to understand and participate in some way.

Ashok's artistic life began before his time studying sculpture at Baroda. Although his parents did not own even a single painting or sculpture, he describes his youth as 'engulfed in spirituality and learning'. His father was a spiritual writer and singer and both his parents were Hindus open to philosophy and writings of every culture. Often Ashok would spend hours with spiritual teachers and gurus learning from them ideas and concepts beyond his age that he would then follow up later in library archives. He would from a young age listen to traditional music from India, world classical music and 'new age' musicians, attuning himself to those intangible qualities of notes, rhythms and harmonies. He says that this 'infrastructure of spirituality' gave him power whilst his time at Baroda provided him an outlet, a means to express what he had learnt during his upbringing.

Ashok describes his time travelling around India before college as a great influence on him too: 'There was a lot of struggle moving around India. The whole journey was an internal one as much as it was a physical trek. ... Although my drawing during my travels was all the time strengthening, my spiritual growth was my priority, not art'. When Ashok finally joined Baroda, he felt that his drawings had enough direction that learning sculpture would enable him to materialise his drawings in the real world. He specialised in sculpture but his drawings never ceased. 'Drawing gave and still gives so much to me. I never depend on the sculpture. I depend on the drawing. Drawing is like an express train. It moves quickly and fluidly from place to place. Sculpture by its very nature is more permanent. In that way it is finality for my drawing though a new and different evocation for the viewer.'

This exhibition demonstrates Ashok's continuing fascination with drawing and the translation of these creations into a sculptural form. His imagery one notes has matured from the once erotic-tantric work that was produced before. This is not to say elements of this are still not present, however, in the drawings at least, it is not as brusquely stated. Today his draughtsmanship is the product of a purer automatism than earlier. Ashok's meditative state during his drawing is so deep and honed that he himself is often surprised as to how the drawings arise: 'There is no ghost operating me from within. ... Complex drawing takes place in a way that I cannot express. It is like I am taken. I do not conceptualise or intellectualise it. I let the energy perform. I am a mediator, a translator, I don't interfere. Between this pen and the energy I am a medium.' As the artist says, his hand moves freely, creating outlines of shapes with his pencil. This early stage of the drawing can take three to four hours; the later minute detailing in contrast might take weeks or months. Both stages involve meditation, patience and a profound enjoyment of the 'becoming' that takes place in parallel with his creating. As the artist puts it so eloquently and mysteriously: '[Art] begins when becoming is dissolved into being an experience in itself.'

When Ashok finally views what is created he revels in its beauty and meaning to him, everyone and everything. No form such as this, he believes, could have been found by seeking it out. They come from the 'deepest recess of consciousness', once translated to paper, 'their experience transports us back into the deepest consciousness.' His works are in this way the product of a communion between himself and the inarticulate, the energy that surrounds him and that is him and, indeed, is all of us too. Perhaps the best examples of this communion is 'This flowing, all I know' (2008) and 'The ritual between us' (2008). 'The ritual between us', Ashok describes as a joyful conversation he had with his Shakti, his soul's inner guardian: 'Sometimes I find myself communicating with myself, with my Shakti within. ... It is a gentle conversation, happy and kind. I talk and she listens. It is mother and child, goddess and worshipper. Here she is saying to me that this body that you have is not your own. It is made out of five elements quite apart from

you. Do not associate yourself with this body. She asks me to look into her vessel, her pot and see the answers I am looking for... I reach out for the top of the pot.' Pots are common symbols in Ashok's work. It can intimate the body as a vessel and, indirectly, knowledge or enlightenment as a pour-able substance. Often you will see heads or bodies carved out, hollowed and made into a pouring jug or a space ready for filling. This sense of the body as intermediary space relates to the Hindu concept of the body as a vehicle for the soul, replaceable and inconsequential.

In 'This flowing, all I know', we note



Above: 'A Gift of the River' (2008), terracotta sculpture, 14 x 5" approx.
Right: 'Parasabadam (Beyond the Sound)' (2008), pencil on paper, 10 x 10.5"

another communion; this time between the artist and those spiritual yogis that have taught him during his life. Male characters in his work almost always refer to these teachers or else to himself as an embodiment of the message of these teachers. They can be spotted easily in his drawings as they have an archetypal 'wise old sage' appearance: they have long beards and the withered look of being burdened with great knowledge. Often they are hidden, found in the outline of a pot or veiled in the wispy mark-making. Here he is concealed in the top right hand corner of the drawing. Ashok says of this character: 'He is me in a way. I exist in the meditative process. It is not that I am wise or sage-like. But rather that I have so much association with my gurus in the world that they are inseparable.... When I think of myself, I see them. When I draw them, I draw myself.' In this piece the wisdom being passed enables transformation and flight. The artist elaborates that this 'dew drop of knowledge is unlike anything intellectual. It is not heard, read, it just exists and here flows and unites with the knowledge of the eternal. From the guru/myself to my Shakti causing infinite flight.'



With the theme of communion is the element of circularity. The imagery within any Ashok drawing often has a narrative line describing an endless energy flow from one body to another and back again. His meditative state like his pencil on the paper, is not static but progressive, moving forward, realising new dimensions of understanding and formation. Like a wheel rolling down a muddy road though, rather than taking on further dirt, relieving itself of the mud as it rolls further along the path. Such a concept of circularity clearly finds roots in Hindu philosophy of reincarnation and karma. Ashok is interested in 'memory pattern' the memories, the spiritual comprehensions, ways of living we take with us into our next lives. One might assume therefore that the tendrils and tentacles of minute pencil marks that connect one body to another in his drawings symbolically represent this transference of energy, memory, meaning and spiritual enquiry. Likewise the transfiguration, distortion and evolution of reality can be read as the visual representation of the world changed during such spiritual transference or communion.

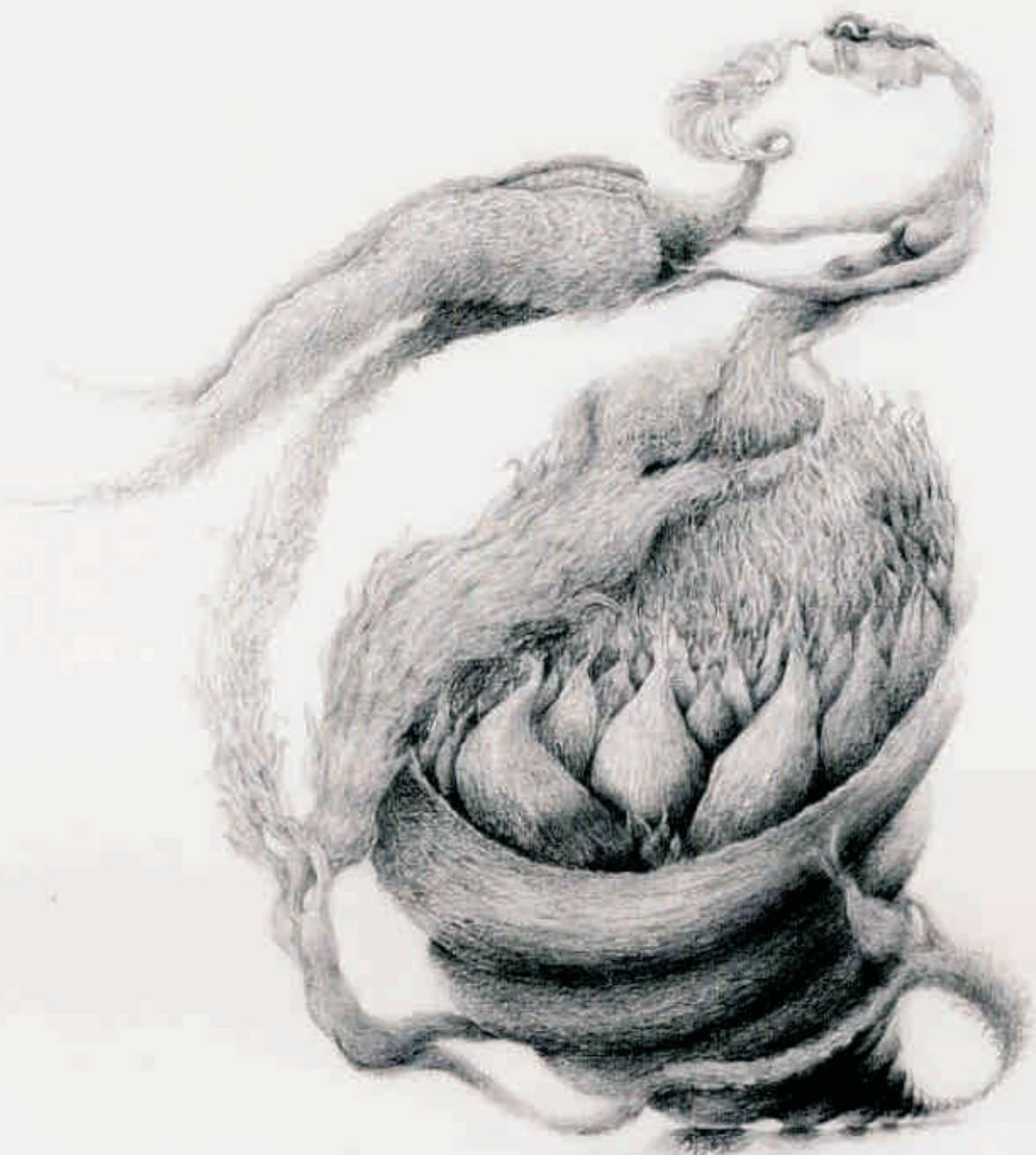
In works such as 'Parasabadam (Beyond the Sound)' (2008) and 'The Celestial Dance' (2008), we see the importance of another Ashok Patel motif the conch shell. The former is an altogether strange image, perhaps the most surreal image in the show. It shows a woman, once again his Shakti, eerily merged with a giant shell. She stands still, embracing it, the lip of the conch extending from her neck outward until it becomes the end of an oil lamp. To Ashok, the repetitive, rhythmic shape of a conch shell, the sense of infinity encapsulated in a natural shape, is hypnotic. The artist remembers practising a type of meditation involving humming: 'I

used to do it so much and find it so relaxing that even in normal life I would find myself humming. That humming sound enabled me to find a meditative state. The seashell relates to the internality of the humming. The inside of the shell echoes the exterior but it is on the inside, hidden from view. The echo within such a shell would circle around like a pinball. There is a growth of sound, a direction as well as a centralisation of the sound within the shell. This all related symbolically to my meditation.' In 'The Celestial Dance' we see the shell (his meditation) bring forth a fecundity of happiness. This welcoming of joy is pictured by his Shakti drawing close the dancing peacock that has come forth from her. Ashok says of the work: 'You need no reason to be joyful. You need reason only to be unhappy. To be happy can be without motive.'

Perhaps two of the most striking works in the exhibition are 'The Cosmos Flowering' (2006) and 'A river keeps on flowing within' (2008). The 2008 drawing speaks of his experience of a river in India which he stumbled upon and then kept returning to, drawn to memories of the river in past lives: 'I would go to the river regularly, spending months there sometimes. When I came back to the UK I wrote down each meditative experience with that river... how it talked to me and how I talked to it.' In this work the artist tells of his conversation, feeling it flow through him as it flowed in front of him. This work is an anomaly in that Ashok concedes to how sometimes such conversation or such 'flow' can be 'a hindrance' and thus needs stopping. For this reason he gives the woman bird-like feet. He imagines the halting of the flow as like a bird taking off from the shore.' The 'The Cosmos Flowering' is a good example of some of the densely detailed masterpieces in the exhibition. It is breathtaking to view and one can see the sheer painstaking brilliance of the artist when armed with a 0.7 lead and a magnifying glass. Each tiny mark seems to bring the work alive so it feels as if we are viewing something otherworldly and magnificently beautiful. The 'cosmos' he refers to is not the planetary universe but 'the particles of energy from which we came' that is our 'celestial home'. It comes into us and flows out of us. Ashok feels we have ruined this relationship with the cosmos, this beauty that he has captured symbolically here. Thus the drawing seems nostalgic as well as celebratory of what we could have again.

It was Dr. Shivaji K. Panikkar that said, quite rightly so, that Ashok Patel's work is 'a pointer to a mammoth art world in the country [India], distinct from the most avant garde artist/intellectual groups.' His work is a return to India's spiritual centre, aiming to lift the soul, give hope and subtract the distrust from our lives. Within this arena of artistic interest, it is the best of its kind. For the artist, it is the appreciation of his work that is most important. As it has been aptly put: 'His drawings and sculpture were never about the profession of art but the medium through which he continuously affirmed his search for non-identity.' His art thus is not about him. Ashok is concerned only with 'contributing to human consciousness.' Ashok states: 'I never claim ownership of my work because it is owned by whoever looks at it. They will get even more from it than me. They need not have created the work to gather from it its meaning. I don't have to learn the sitar to understand it. If I attune myself to the sitar I believe I can pass through the fingers of the sitarist and go further into the sound than he. I want the viewer to do the same. Treat me, the artist, as just a landmark on a journey into the work.' In this soft manner, Ashok Patel is not a preacher but a bearer of an invitation, a kind invite to join him under the same banyan tree that has awarded him such shade of happiness, comfort and trust. In this cynical world, the offer is certainly alluring.

Jana Manuelpillai
Director



'The Celestial Dance' (2008), pencil on paper, 13 x 11"

ASHOK PATEL

Born in Padra, Gujarat in 1963

The artist lives and works in London, UK

Attained a Diploma in Fine Art Sculpture (1979-82) and a Post-Diploma in Fine Art Sculpture (1983-85)

From the Baroda M.S. University, Gujarat; Studied Kathak dance (1997-9) and Music & Vocal studies (1981) at Baroda M.S. University

Solo Exhibitions

- 2007 Haymarket Theatre, Basingstoke
- 2007 Queen Mary's College, Basingstoke
- 2001 Central Studio, Basingstoke
- 2001 The Mill Art Centre, Oxfordshire
- 2000 The Mill Art Centre, Oxfordshire
- 1998 The Nehru Centre, London
- 1997 'Freedom from the Known', Meghraj Gallery, London
- 1996 'Now I am Nowhere', Mandir Gallery, London
- 1995-96 'The Lotus Meditation', Commonwealth Institute, London
- 1993 Sunrise Institute, Reading
- 1991 '1981-91 - Sculptures' Jehangir Art Gallery, Bombay

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1998 Royal College of Physicians, London
- 1997 Chichester Open Art Exhibition, Chichester
- 1996 ARKS Gallery, London
- 1996 Meghraj Gallery, London
- 1995 Gallery Space, New Delhi
- 1992 Chauhan Centre, Bombay
- 1988 Baroda Faculty of Fine Arts, Gujarat

Collections

Numerous collections in India, Japan, Belgium, Germany, Korea, UK, France and USA

Selected Bibliography & Other Media

'The S.H. Daya Collection of Contemporary Indian Art' by Dnyaneshwar Nadkarni, 1994

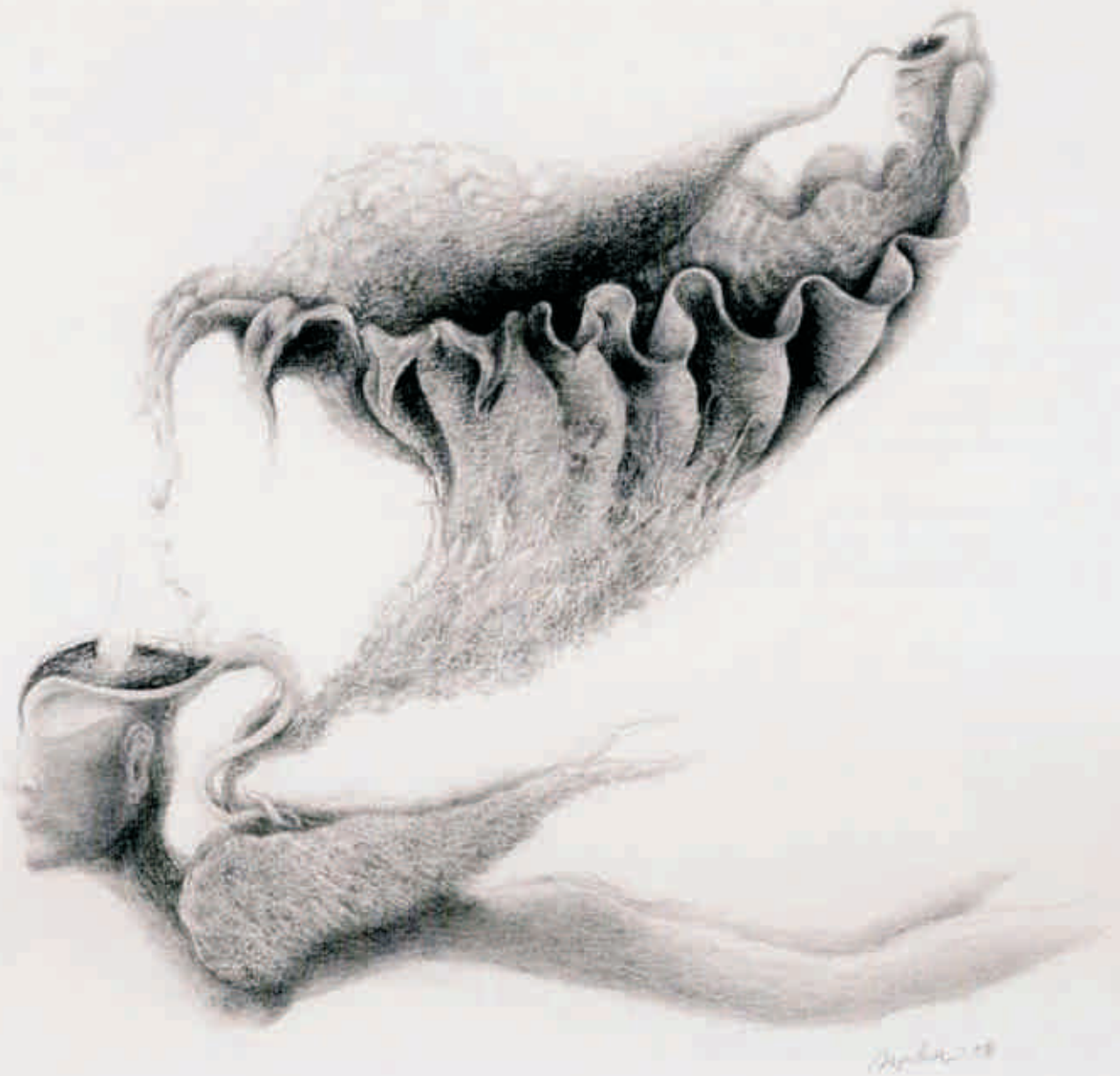
ZEE TV Programme, 1997

BBC TV Programme, 1995

Awards

Artist Award (First Category), Lalit Kala Akademi, Gujarat State, 1990

Artist Award (First Category), Lalit Kala Akademi, Gujarat State, 1983



Detail of 'This flowing, all I know' (2008), pencil on paper, 13 x 11"



Jana Manuepillai
Director

The Noble Sage Art Gallery is the first gallery in the United Kingdom to specialise in Indian contemporary art.


Situated in North London, minutes from Highgate, Hampstead and Muswell Hill, The Noble Sage boasts 200 metres square of elegant art gallery space solely dedicated to the display and propulsion of South Asian contemporary art in the European art scene.

The Noble Sage was initiated in April 2006 by its director, Jana Manuepillai MA. Holding more than eleven years experience in art galleries and museums such as the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and the world-famous Mall Galleries off London's Trafalgar Square, together with academic qualifications in History of Art and Museology, Jana is a formidable player in the South Asian art scene.

Opening Times

Mondays & Tuesdays	By appointment only
Wednesday to Friday	11 – 7.30pm
Saturday & Sunday	11 – 5pm



 The Noble Sage



Design N PrasannaKumar
Print Sudarsan Graphics

Prasanna



The Noble Sage

2A Fortis Green
London N2 9EL United Kingdom
+44(0) 208 883 7303

reception@thenoblesage.com www.thenoblesage.com