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Water in contemporary Indian art

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Abstract

Along with being the most important source of life on earth, water has also played an important role in man's creative journey. Artists have time and again represented water in their works and even today water surfaces in art works around the world. The contemporary artists of India have used water and its image in their paintings sculptures and also installations. My aim in writing this paper is to identify the works of some of the leading contemporary artist of India in which water has been used as an important part of the installation. I will also be analyzing these works according to the use of water in them, trying to understand the versatility of its artistic use.

Keywords: Contemporary Indian Art, Water, Subodh Kerkar, Anish Kapoor, Vivan Sundaram

1. Introduction

Water is essential for life, at least on earth it is and this necessity since pre-historic times has seeped in our art as well. Initially in art, like most of the other things water too was shown in symbolic and stylized form, but with the growing popularity of realistic representation in the fifteenth century Europe, artists of the Renaissance period painted water as they saw it. The artists over the centuries have used water in art to narrate stories, showing it in different moods and also as symbol of power, especially in mythology. In Indian mythology rivers like Ganges took the form of a goddess and attained sacred space in the Hindu religion. Likewise in other parts of the world too water bodies were considered sacred. In the Greek mythology Neptune is the lord of sea where as the Ancient Egyptians considered Hapi the god of flooding associated with the annual flooding of the river Nile. All these mythological beliefs are represented in art either by personifying the water bodies or depicting them as symbolic wavy lines. Roman murals with paintings of women enjoying the bath are another example of water's presence in art. In Asian art too water has been part of many schools of painting, like in Pahari paintings rain drops are sometimes shown as diagonal lines falling from the dark overcast sky and in traditional Chinese paintings the artists sometimes show the tranquility of water by painting a calm sea. Water in its different forms has been a source of inspiration in paintings for the artists over the centuries.

In architectural designs too water has played an important role. Water fountains have adorned the urban landscape since the Roman architect's initiation to build great aqueducts, in order to move water from one place to another, and the Romans are also well known for building huge public baths. The sculptors saw this as an opportunity to exhibit their talent and beautiful fountains were created which became the foundation for future artists to work on who were assigned with such a task. Similarly artificial water bodies were created in gardens, town squares and palaces in many other parts of the world. The Mogul gardens generally have a canal dividing the garden area into four parts adding to the beauty of the landscape. In 1892, the great impressionist painter Claude Monet, having bought some land near his house in Giverny, a village in Northern France, had diverted the Epte, a tributary of the Seine River in order to create a brook called Ru in the garden. This place became the centre of his human and artistic experience for a good twenty five years.

There are contemporary artists who have taken water in art to an altogether new level by using water as art itself. Some contemporary artists are sculpting the frozen form of water to create art, whereas many artists in Japan are busy writing and creating images on liquid water. Here we see science's intervention in art. At many places in Osaka, public art is created by using this latest technology resulting in installations like vertical pounds. Contemporary Indian artists have also found muse in water and many of them are using water or representation of water in their works. In this paper I will be discussing some works

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of the leading contemporary artists of India and of Indian origin who have incorporated water in their works as an important element. The discussion will also bring to fore the intention of the artist while using this essential source of life as part of their creativity.



Water in Contemporary Indian Art

Subodh Kerkar, 'The Earth Bowl', 2011.

Subodh Kerkar is a Goa based artist who takes his inspiration from his surroundings and especially from the sea. As he has lived his entire life near the sea it is but natural that water surfaces in his art time and again. Kerkar follows a meticulous process while creating a piece of art. He is known for intently studying tides when he uses the sea in his works. He is a trained medical Doctor and had worked in this profession for some years before he gave it up to follow his dream of becoming a professional artist. Since he had studied science he is known for incorporating his scientific knowledge in his artistic works as well. He is an activist artist who prefers to create environmentally friendly art. Seashells, sand, water, trees, palm leaves and many other locally available materials are used by him for his installations. Most of his works are done out in the open, although it is not an essential feature of his works.

Subodh Kerkar has created many installations using water and one of them is the 'The Earth Bowl' installed at Vagator beach, Goa. This installation not only stands as a symbol of universal brotherhood but also promotes tourism in Goa as many tourists flock to the beach to see this work. By carving a perfect bowl in a rock on the beach, which extends like a ramp into the sea, Subodh is extenuating the fact that it is the same

source of water which fills both the bowl and the sea. As the bowl gets filled with big waves splashing the rock, a divide is created between the water but still there is a link between them as the water in the bowl is part of the sea. Subodh sees sea as united and hence symbolising 'Worldly brotherhood.' In 2009 he created another, performance based work titled 'Of Donkeys, Demons and Diabolical Death' in which he had used sea as part of the work. Based on the 26th November 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack, due to which many citizens of India had lost their lives at the hands of young misguided and brainwashed men, Kerkar created this performance on the beach as it was through the route of the sea that these terrorists had entered Mumbai. By diluting red coloured environmentally friendly pigment in the water he recreated the bloodshed associated with this attack. In these works the artists has used water to promote social issues of unity and our war against terrorism which highlights the activist in him.

Anish Kapoor is a name well known in the contemporary international art circle. His sculptures are installed in several countries around the world including USA, Israel, UK and Australia. Anish was born in Indian to a Panjabi Hindu father and Israeli mother in Mumbai in the year 1954. He did his schooling from The Doon School, Dehradun. From here he left for Israel with his brother and then travelled to UK where he attained his education in art from Hornsey College of Art and Chelsea School of Art and Design. Although Anish Kapoor had started making sculptures in the early 1970's but it was with his geometric or biomorphic sculptures made in the 80's that he captured the notice of the art circle around the world.

Anish Kapoor may be of Indian origin but his works contain a more western influence with a heavy dose of simplicity of form which is almost like his trade mark, although his Indian upbringing sometimes spring up in his works. Despite being simple, his work comprises of magnificent effect that engages its viewer completely. One of his mirror like work which reflects and distorts the viewer and surroundings is called the 'Cloud Gate' is installed at Millennium Park in Chicago. This work has become a well visited tourist spot in itself. You cannot claim to have seen Chicago if you didn't get a picture clicked with it. Likewise, his other sculptures like Tarantara installed in 1999 at Gateshead, England, Monumenta installation in 2011 for the Grand Palais in Paris and many other works too have contributed in his claim to fame. Orbit, one of his sculptures was chosen to be installed in London Olympic Park in the year 2012, which is the tallest sculpture in England.

Anish is one of the most influential artists of this generation and this is confirmed by the fact that he is the only living artist to have had a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in 2009. Besides influence, Kapoor often creates stir in the art marked with his works fetching millions. In 2008 alone he made a profit of \$27 millions including his record auction price of 1.94 million, also set in the same year. Recipient of Padam Bhushan in 2012, along with many other prestigious awards, Anish exhibited his works for the first time in India in 2011 in Delhi and Mumbai. The exhibition had works from his early pigment pieces to the more recent polished steel works, including a huge outdoor work called 'Sky Mirror'. Throughout his career, Anish Kapoor has been involved in many architecture based projects although he believes his works are neither purely sculptural nor architectural in nature. Ark Nova, Orbit and Building for a Void are some of these projects that he has made over the years.

Recently he created stir yet again with his installation titled 'Descension' exhibited at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which is India's first biennale for contemporary art. In this work Anish included water as an important element. He created a whirlpool with black water guarded by a metal fence. The water spins into a seemingly bottomless hole as if consuming everything. The metal barricade gives an illusion of confining the swirl within a boundary while it continuously threatens to break free. Anish's installation is open for interpretation, depending on the mental status of the viewer. He, however, gave it a title which stresses on the downward motion that the whirl creates. The colour of the water that the artist chose also points out at a sense of depression or gloom which may be associated with this work. However the force that the whirl creates is aggressive and it gives life to the installation. The work *Descension* is also believed to destabilize the experience of the solidity of the ground we stand on.



Anish Kapoor, 'Descension', 2014.

Another artist who has made use of water in his work is Vivan Sundaram. He belongs to the family of Amrita Sher-Gil, one of the most celebrated woman artists of the Modern Art in India. He is from an influential family of Majithia clan who resided in Shimla in the early twentieth century. Vivan is Amrita's sister's son who was born in 1943, many years after Amrita's death. Although Vivan never met his Aunt but he inherited her artistic talent and went on to become an acclaimed artists of India. He got his training in Fine Arts from the M.S. University, Baroda, and also from the Slade School of London. While in London, he took training for sometime under the British-American painter R. B. Kitaj. Vivan has worked in many mediums and he is one of the first Indian artists to create installation based art works. Vivan Sundaram's installation titled '*Black Gold*' at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale in the year 2013 was created out of pottery shards collected from the archaeological site of Pattanam. It is believed that an ancient legendary seaport of Muziris at Pattanam in Kerela was destroyed in the year 1341 due to a massive flood. Vivan in his installation created a recollection of the port by meticulously assembling the pottery shards to create the ruined city. Although this model of the site is totally imaginary on the artist's part but its concept is based in history. He had also placed seeds of black pepper with the shards of pottery which indicated at the spice trade for which the port was famous for. A text which read, "Beauty is located at the shifting centre of slow time that enables us to plunge into waters that carry us to other shores," was pasted next to the installation. Vivan did not leave the installation in this state but he eventually flooded it with water slowly destroying the

installation which was created with painstaking hard work. He did it as the reminder of the flood that had destroyed the port city. The process was captured in a three-minute film with no soundtrack. The process of creation of the installation and its destruction was all part of the art work.



Vivan Sundaram, installation (detail) at The Kochi-Muziris Biennale, 2013.

Conclusion

Ice, snow, oceans, rain, rivers, ponds and lakes all have been creatively explored by artists around the world and over the millenniums to serve art and they continue to do so even today. The representation may have changed over years due to advancement of human thinking and technology but the lure of controlling this natural resource which holds the lifeline on earth intrigues artists to experiment more. They continue to astonish us with their new approaches and yet hinting at infinite possibilities that need to be explored. Indian artists to a great extent have been successful in indulging in this fascination. An activist artist like Subodh Kerkar uses water to deliberate on some social message, spreading awareness with his art. Anish Kapoor on the other hand is interested in its abstract form and auto generated motion. Vivan Sundaram's concern while using water in his art is to recreate history with his work. All three of the artists have used water in different ways to suite their purpose, each creating powerful but altogether different works of art from each other. This indicates at infinite use of water in art and also at the willingness of Indian contemporary artists to find new possibilities in doing so.

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