

Transcript of Amal Ghosh interview

Shyama: I'm Shyama Perera talking with the artist Amal Ghosh who was born in India and came to the UK in the early 1950s to further develop his craft. Today, Amal's work is exhibited in public collections and private collections and on streets in different parts of the world as his interest has moved to public art. You can read an academic appraisal of Amal's work and see examples of it on the SADAA archive.

Amal, when you came to England you must have found a big difference in teaching methods and focus?

Amal: Yes, I did because in India art school where I had been doing the first 5 years almost, the whole teaching method was almost a copy of Slade teaching here. And that teaching was very rigid and, very kind of, disciplined. When I came here, it was utterly different, it was very, very relaxed and more or less I was told to do what I liked. This was something which I was not used to at all. In India it was very prescribed, and you had to do exactly what you were told. There was an enormous problem for me that I wasn't used to having this kind of complete freedom. In fact, for a about a couple of days, it took quite a long time to really adjust to this kind of teaching.

Shyama: Explain a little to me of the family you were leaving behind and how that sort of contrasted with this new world. You know you were leaving behind not just this quite formal teaching in India, but also quite disparate family story and you suddenly arrive here and having to think in new and different ways.

Amal: Well, I come from a very staunch background. The family was quite a big family, it was a kind of joint family. I was really pampered in a way which most of the Indian first son is done. When I came here, I had very few people I knew except two or three people who were my father's friends and I was put into a kind of hostel and that was YMCA in Tottenham Court Road and most of the fellow student around there were all doing either medicine, or engineering. I was the only one who was doing something called visual art.

Shyama: Although of course, you did have a little experience of medicine from India.

Amal: My family would not let me do art or go to art school. So, I was forced to go to medical college where two of my uncles were doctors. I was told that you have to be a doctor so I, the only way I could get out of that was to stop taking exam, which I did. And then after a lot of struggle in the family, they realised I would not go on doing medicine. Well, they arranged that I go to the art school in Calcutta which I did. I was, by this time, a bit older than I should have been. The admission to college was, I think two years less I had, so I had to wait for a while and then the principal of the art college saw my work and said that you can start from the second year, you don't have to do the first year. That's how it was adjusted.

Shyama: So, you know, having struggled and got yourself out of medical school, you're accepted at art college because they spot immediately that you have great gifts there that they want to develop with you. You then come to the UK and you find yourself sitting with young doctors, but you are now an artist. What was it in particular that you wanted to look at and learn once you came here?

Amal: In India from our home, I was sent to a Roman Catholic school which was really the best school in Calcutta. And this Roman Catholic school was absolutely I think, as far as I

remember, was incredibly strict and very good for education. There, I met somebody called Father Montero and he was a scholar and he was also incredible connoisseur of art in India and also of Europe. And his main area of love was stained glass which I saw in the college chapel and as he talked about the glass and as his enthusiasm was there on it, all of sudden I thought, I thought I would like to do that too. So, my main reason for coming to Europe was to study stained glass.

Shyama: And did you?

Amal: Yes, I came to Europe and then I came first to France because that was, I thought the best...my father thought that was the best place for stained glass. I wasn't on scholarship, my family was paying for the, for my study, but, the Indian government, they would not support somebody studying in an appelier instead of, kind of, college degree course. And that is how I came to England and then the place which was doing stained glass was Central St Martin, at that time, it was called Central School of Art and Design, so I started stained glass there. Stained glass was the second part of my study, first was painting, and then it was stained glass.

Shyama: And here you were being encouraged to be free, to free yourself of any constraints of what you had been taught before. Did that mean having to get in touch with who were and what your Indianness meant and what your Britishness and what your move meant?

Amal: This is something which was very difficult to understand at that time, because what I thought is that I was very good at the academic drawing which I was taught. But when I came here, I was told that you know, this was nothing to do India, it is nothing to do with you as an Indian to go on using this this, so I had to really learn what Indian art is. So, in fact, I had a tutor, whose name is Cecil Collins, who is quite famous artist here, and he told me to go to British Museum and study Indian section and work on there and have tutorial on those. I had to do that for 3 months and after doing that I realised that what art school in England was asking me to do was to relearn how to look at things from different, from completely different way, because it was an Indian way of looking at an object, instead of looking at European.

Shyama: That sounds actually, quite difficult, to change your perspective, particularly on art, having been taught a Eurocentric way, but also, I suppose, seeing the rest of the world. This may seem an impossible question, but can you articulate what that feels like or give an example of how you might look at something from a Eurocentric viewpoint and then turn all of that around, drawing on your own experience to see it differently.

Amal: I think by now I had understood both but at that time I didn't. European way of looking at things is kind of physical beauty, physical involvement. Indian way of looking at things is more about symbolic way of looking at it and also about understanding a kind of spirituality of things and this was completely absent from European work which I was looking or being taught. So that becomes very important and that took me some time to relate in my painting or in my work.

Shyama: And yet your paintings are known for that stillness and almost a form of spirituality and the bleeding of colour. I don't know how you can describe what you did and where in your heart or your passion you drew for that.

Amal: Well, I think as I go on looking at my work, I discover myself and inside me the thing which I really related to was this kind of way of looking which is really looking beyond

something which is physical and that beyond was also in European art and I started also relating to them when I think of artists like Rothko which I go very involved with and looked at and then I realised that both has got that, but one is much more explicit, other one is much more hidden.

Shyama: And so, what you were doing, I suppose, was showing us how those two cultures can come together, the two ways of thinking, can come together to create something new. You then go on to teach at St Martin's and at the Vishwa Bharati University, how did you take what you had learnt to these new audiences and use it to influence the way they thought about art?

Amal: Let me talk about Central School. When I started at Central School there were two artists who were teaching, one was Cecil Collins, one was Alan Davie. Both are very known in a kind of a way which I understood. They talked about spiritual things, they talked about inner spirit and how to link it with their own work. So, one starts kind of selecting things, selecting people, selecting artists and they become your monitor and I started linking that with my own background and my own work. And that became more and more my work or my kind of work and in most of my work you'll find that I have used lot of symbols and this comes from understanding depth and inner spirit of a thing.

Shyama: Tell me more about the work that you have done, not just painting but with enamelling and the move across to public art.

Amal: That is another area. Coming here and working like that, all of a sudden, I realised that I would like to be part of the community. I was almost living slightly separate, at that particular time, I also met Iris, my wife and my partner. We, together, started kind of working for community and we did altogether 35 or 36 works in different kind of places, like hospitals, like roads, like museums and things like that. And they were large kind of murals. We used painting, enamel and glass.

Shyama: When you look back at your early days, I know you had quite a difficult childhood, your mother died when you were three, and your father, I think at the time, was imprisoned for fighting for a free India. How do you think those early years are reflected in what you have done subsequently?

Amal: You mean here or in India?

Shyama: In both

Amal: What I did here mainly, was learn and imply and when I... I made a point of taking time off from my teaching and went to India to do quite a lot of work. I taught at Shantiniketan which where...my father did and that's a Tagore university in Bengal and also my own college which was Government College of Art. Every year I taught at least two or three months which was partly vacation here and partly unpaid work.

Shyama: What were you bringing there, Amal. I'm just interested to know when you were talking with the students, you know, you yourself had such a huge metamorphosis as a human being in order to create the work that you did, what is it you tell your students now, what is more important, you know, formal feeling, intuition or the absolute? What should they be led by?

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Amal: Well, what you are asking is about what art is? And it's really about feeling, for me, it's mainly about feeling. And I think it's mainly about understanding different culture and in fact, all the cultures have got the same kind of resonance as you go deeper into it. I don't have a kind of feeling that any culture is not good enough for me. I like and also have done all the time, shared, and I think that this sharing of things gives you enormous amount of background and understanding. And that in return, brings enormous amount of images which then I can transfer into my work. And that is how I teach people, that art is not something to do with looking at a particular idea, art is not telling story, art is something which you feel. And the feeling is the main component of creating, for me.

Shyama: So, it's more about sensibility and passion, I suppose, rather than what's actually in front of you.

Amal: I think you're right. The thing which is in front of me is almost there, but it would just disappear after a while. Things which I'm interested in which I can hold onto and leave it so that it can grow, to something...to enhance your own self. Art is about enhancing yourself and that is what I am really interested in...mainly.

Shyama: Do you know, I was going to ask you, what is the legacy that your generation of successful artists leaves for those from a similar background and I suppose, that actually was the answer, wasn't it? So, why have you agreed for us to have your work, very gratefully, it must be said, in the SADAA archive?

Amal: Well, you know, I feel that I am part of...of a big community here and SADAA is one of the big thing which...I don't think it's been neglected but it has been not given enough support and enough focus and I am trying to do my bit to be part of it so that I can also share with other people what I am.

Shyama: Amal Ghosh, thank you very much.

Amal: Thank you.