

Hammer of the Square

Himmat Shah

A Retrospective (1957 - 2015)

Preview: 27 January 2016, 7pm onwards**Opens for Public:** 28 January - 30 June 2016, 10:30am – 6:30pm except Monday**Venue:** KNMA, 145, DLF South Court Mall, Saket, New Delhi 110017**Curator:** Roobina Karode

Book Release of Himmat Shah's 'Drawings' and 'Paintings'

'Looking at a seed can you imagine the entire tree? One who can imagine the tree looking at its seed and the seed looking at the tree is a reflection of a true artistic vision'. Himmat Shah

A hammer (sans the hand) elegantly fixed onto a cube (sans mass). The gravitational connect between the distinct geometries of the two forms catapults one into an arbitration of potentialities created by the artist.

Cones, spheres, mounds of various kinds and sizes, anthills, beehives, eye of the mountain, temples and flags, cylinders, birds, real and imaginary animal forms, hollow of the moulds, fossil-like fragments, and so on: the 'intimate immensity' of Himmat Shah's sensual world of forms and mysteries, his marveling at the beauty of the changing form constitutes the exhibition '*Hammer on the Square*'.

Kiran Nadar Museum of Art (KNMA) is pleased to present the first ever comprehensive showing of eminent artist **Himmat Shah through the decades from 1957 to 2015**. This exhibition is a celebration of Himmat Shah's solitary pursuit and his inspiring nomadic life lived under an open sky that transformed into a recurrent poetic metaphor of the vastness and infinity of space in his work. It celebrates his prolific and rich oeuvre that has never been seen together in its entirety, a joyous exploration as if an archaeological treasure seen in a variety of surfaces and textures, an assimilation of impressions, casts and moulds of found objects, and new spatial registers.

Tracing and underlining Himmat Shah's contribution to the discourse of modern Indian art, the exhibition presents around **300 works** with 215 from the KNMA collection and loans from various public and private institutions and collections. Along with his famous terracotta sculptures, bronzes, and drawings, it brings to light his lesser-known mediums and extraordinary body of works—high-relief murals, burnt paper collages and silver paintings—hardly seen by the Indian art fraternity and public at large. '*Hammer on the Square*' highlights key ideas in Himmat Shah's works: fragility and transience of existence, the heightened relationship between ephemeral layers and stasis, his intense connect and understanding of the materials and material world, and echoes of lost civilizations and cultures.

The selection spans over almost six decades; starting from his early burnt paper collages that he exhibited in the famous Group 1890 exhibition at Lalit Kala Akademi in 1964 to the few surviving silver paintings that will be exhibited for the first time after 1973. Though trained in painting Himmat Shah turned to exploring new mediums right after completing his formal education. The exhibition showcases a number of seminal terracotta sculptures from his acclaimed 'Head' series to small found objects, vessels and containers that demonstrate the artist's continuous inquiries. The exhibition includes around 175 drawings, made from 1957 when he was a student at the Fine Arts Faculty in Vadodara to his most recent work in 2015. These drawings are an invaluable record of the journey and observations, indicating the directions pursued by him. These drawings are referenced as anchor points of the entire exhibition.

Also presented is a gallery of portraits, bronze heads, projected as maquettes of possible future buildings, and his monumental bronze sculptures. When Himmat Shah was innovating techniques, experimenting and comprehending the plastic values of art, his contribution somehow got underwritten in the dominant narratives of figuration and narration in modernism in Indian art. This exhibition, in continuation with the retrospective of Nasreen Mohamedi and the forthcoming show of Jeram Patel at KNMA, is an avenue for opening up the dialogue on Indian modernism, in particular the two decades - 1960s and 1970s. It proposes a reshuffling of ways of viewing Himmat's works, actively situating his practice among his peer-group of artists, and the study of abstraction. By bringing his large body of work to public domain, this exhibition aims to provide a re-visitation and create a rightful context in which to be seen.

The experience of walking through the exhibition *'Hammer on the Square'* is designed like digging through the ephemeral layers of a deposition made over a period of time. From the walls to the floor, the exhibited works unfurl a landscape, cartography, and an individual language of abstraction developed by Himmat Shah in the last six decades, exposing the limitless beauty found in the everyday. Himmat's work combines the abstraction with the local vernacular anecdotes, observations and materials, most times transforming everyday objects into meditative icons with variety of actions performed on and with them. Many of Himmat's early drawings, sculptures and reliefs incorporate a dense clustering of simple geometric forms and mythic and archaic symbols within their surfaces. Himmat's art presents a coming together of cultures, artistic traditions and contemporary life. Rather than presenting a chronological sequence, the exhibition display takes a nonhierarchical approach to all the works from different stages of Himmat Shah's career, following the continuities and creative flows dictated by his enquiries.

Talking about Himmat Shah's persona, the curator, Roobina Karode elaborates, *"If there is an Indian artist who possesses the free-spiritedness of the bohemian and has embraced the emancipatory disposition of art, it has to be Himmat Shah. After more than six decades of engagement with art, he is still possessed by a meandering spirit tuned to the spurt of a creative moment that often occurs in states of mindlessness or rapture. All by himself, Himmat wandered and lived—amidst the ruins of the pre-historic sites of Lothal where he was born, on farmlands in arid desert environments, in the wilderness of the dense Dang jungles and the Gir, processing emotions of fear, uncertainty and danger, gathering transformative experiences early on, not knowing then what he was seeking in life, or in art. He extensively explored the landscapes of Gujarat and Rajasthan, aimlessly wandering through the desert, climbing hills, living in deserted caves, walking the tilled fields or sleeping under the vastness of the sky."*

Himmat Shah comments on the making of this exhibition: *"I'm grateful to Kiran Nadar and Roobina Karode, who I know for many years, for making this exhibition possible. It is an extremely satisfying experience to see coming together of my entire life through my work. My ideas and concepts are based on looking within the form. I've worked all my life. While working I immerse myself in another world altogether. It's a mystery."*

Kiran Nadar, Founder & Chairperson, KNMA, adds, *"Himmat Shah's contribution to the Indian modern art in 1960s is individualistic and unique. It is important that such deserving artist with undeterred commitment and radical vision get his due by the world. His works need to be brought into the public domain. KNMA is performing that role, in providing this important historical vantage point."*

Many chance encounters have informed his artistic sensibility, each instance presenting him with a new material. For example, in early 1960s while sitting in a friend's office, Himmat playfully burnt a few holes into a paper borrowed from the typist, which led him to work with the fragile and sensuous burnt paper collage forms. The brilliant formal compositions and playful abstraction of the collages are among his early modernist experiments to arrive at pure form. After returning from Paris, Himmat Shah started working on three ambitious brick, cement and concrete high-relief murals on site for the St. Xavier's Primary School in Ahmedabad in 1968-69, upon an invitation of his architect friend Hasmukh Patel. Created with the intention of igniting the imagination of children, they are a brilliant

play of forms, shadows and tactility, formed by most rudimentary geometric shapes and patterns. Till date these high-reliefs are the most ambitious murals relating to architecture in the urban Indian context. His study in Paris in environment and urban design found a strong outlet through these facades designed on a modernist building. He interviewed several masons and carpenters working in Ahmedabad and created a team of the master-workers who assisted him in executing the three murals. Lack of proper machinery and equipment in India led him to develop and improvised new methods for creating the moulds. The exhibition includes four surviving moulds of four sections of one of the three murals, loaned from the acclaimed collection of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi. It is a rare feat to experience his brilliant geometric constructions, simple patterns accentuating qualities of depth and surface.

Simultaneous to the high-relief murals are his low-relief experiments, what he calls as 'Silver Paintings'. Made between 1968 to 1973, he used Plaster of Paris and sand to create them, treating parts of the surface with silver paint and silver leaf (warq). Most of them were lost in a flood; the exhibition displays four surviving silver paintings. Himmat Shah says, "I lost the paintings but I had experienced the joy of creating them; that experience was not lost." Juxtaposed with the high-reliefs, these silver paintings show how he radicalized the perception of sculpture in Indian art, his explorations develop more elaborately into his terracotta works and drawings. Though not trained in sculpture, his friendship with Raghav Kaneria and other sculptors provided him enough methods and ease to innovate further. These silver painted reliefs are cartography of his imaginary internal landscapes. He used many common objects like empty plant pots, tin scrap, sieves etc, and varied techniques to achieve different textures and plasticity on the surface. This series of paintings was first exhibited at the Konark Gallery, Delhi, in 1970, and then in the second exhibition at the Max Mueller Bhavan, Delhi in 1973. Critic Richard Bartholomew in his review of Max Mueller Bhavan exhibition published in Times of India on March 28, 1973, wrote, "his constructions offer us a sense of a spatial dimension. They stir our imagination, making us rove in the immense spaces that envelope this earth of ours. They seem like fantastic landscapes of the space world with forms and patterns hanging like planets and stars in the awesome void."

Curator Roobina Karode adds, "*The constraint of space and the affordability of materials had a direct bearing on his choice of materials and medium. But, never bereft of unconventional ideas, Himmat transformed wastage and left-overs from his mural into basic material for his silver paintings, evolving a new vocabulary of expressive textures and tactile sub-structures.*"

The first-hand experience of witnessing Archaeological Survey of India's (ASI) excavations done in Lothal between 1955 and 1960, its archaic clay pottery, frequent play-visits to the nearby potters' colony as a child, appears most strongly in his terracotta sculptures that he started working during the late 1970s and 1980s. Technique, craft and chance best describes this corpus of fragile terracotta works, made from clay aged and tediously prepared for five or more years, all by himself. Broadly categorized as Garhi years, the studio in Garhi artists' village created by Lalit Kala Akademi in 1976 was his most engaged and productive period. Garhi studio became his cave for almost twenty five years. Artist Krishen Khanna described it in 1980s as: "His studio is a storehouse of objects he has picked up and which outgrew their use and found their way to junkyards and the rubbish heap." His terracotta works are embedded with the condensed era spanning eons. Each common object, landscape, head is an icon or a sign of a lost language and world, undergoing processes of forgetting, revising and remembering again. He sculpts each head in all possible shapes, textures and combination: eyeless, wrinkled and marked; suspended between a hollow, lost man and a deity. Pressed between being and becoming is his seminal sculpture Tirthankar. Made in 1995 it is the central-piece of the exhibition, echoing a lost world, civilisational fragments abstracted into minimal signs and raw gestural markings.

Flag atop an unknown temple, fort or building or hilltop are scattered throughout the exhibition space, invoking a landscape painstakingly constructed. The flag-topped temples scattered in the desert of Rajasthan give solace to the nomads. The exhibition also showcases an array of small sculptures made from casts of found-objects - funnels, bottles, vessels, tyre tubes, cylindrical forms, molten cylinders, rope – at times hiding and revealing forms within forms. These resuscitated small sculpture-objects command presence and dominate a vast expanse of space.

Drawing for Himmat became central to his conception of the visual form. His drawings on paper stand apart as independent works, as significant and integral to his holistic vision as his sculptures in terracotta and bronze. His advancing and receding lines weave multiple dimensions and visions of vast space. They range from his early drawings in 1957-64 of heads, peering face with agonized expression and architectural motifs that reappears in sculptural forms later, to dark erotic drawings, to constructive strokes and journey of a single unbroken line to gestural calligraphic scripts. One of the iconic linocuts 'Yellow Stone' which was used for the cover of Contra66. His life and artistic practice are not separate entities. Each of his bronze head becomes a geography, a three-dimensional architecture whose surface is marked with different lines intersecting and diverging, fissures wearing down, grooves penetrating so deep and cutting through. The architectonic quality distinguishes one from the other. Made with inventive and extraordinary techniques, unique patina and textures, a majority of these bronzes were casted in London between 2005 and 2007.

Yet, the hammer (sans the hand) elegantly sits on a cube (sans mass), awaiting.

Notes to Editors

About the artist

Himmat Shah is acknowledged as one of the most remarkable artists working today in India, Himmat Shah was born in 1933 in Lothal, Gujarat, one of the prominent cities of Indus valley civilization, and currently lives and works in Jaipur, Rajasthan.

After initial training at Dakshinamurti in Bhavnagar, he studied painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts of M.S.University, Baroda, from 1955 to 1961. He received National Cultural Scholarship in 1956, and received a French Government scholarship to study in Paris from 1966-67. Shah was a founder member of Group 1890, a short-lived artists' group, formed in 1962 along with J. Swaminathan, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Jeram Patel, Ambadas etc. The group dispersed soon after their seminal exhibition at the Lalit Kala Akademi in 1963, and each of its members, including Shah continued their artistic practices with their own agendas. While still a student Himmat Shah had received Lalit Kala National Award for Painting twice, in 1959 and 1962. He was also awarded the Gold Medal by the Jammu & Kashmir Academy of Art in 1960. He came to be known and appreciated within the artistic circles for his erotic drawings exhibition in 1964 in Delhi, and created quite a stir. His early exhibitions were well-received and earned him a unique position. In 2003, the artist was honored with the Kalidasa Samman by the Government of Madhya Pradesh. Shah has also received the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS) Award, New Delhi, in 1996, and the Sahitya Kala Parishad Award, New Delhi, in 1988. He has held numerous group and solo exhibitions in India and abroad and has represented the country in 'Festival of Indian Art' in Moscow in 1996, the 'Biennale de Paris' in 1967 and 1970 and 'biennale 13' in Antwerp.

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