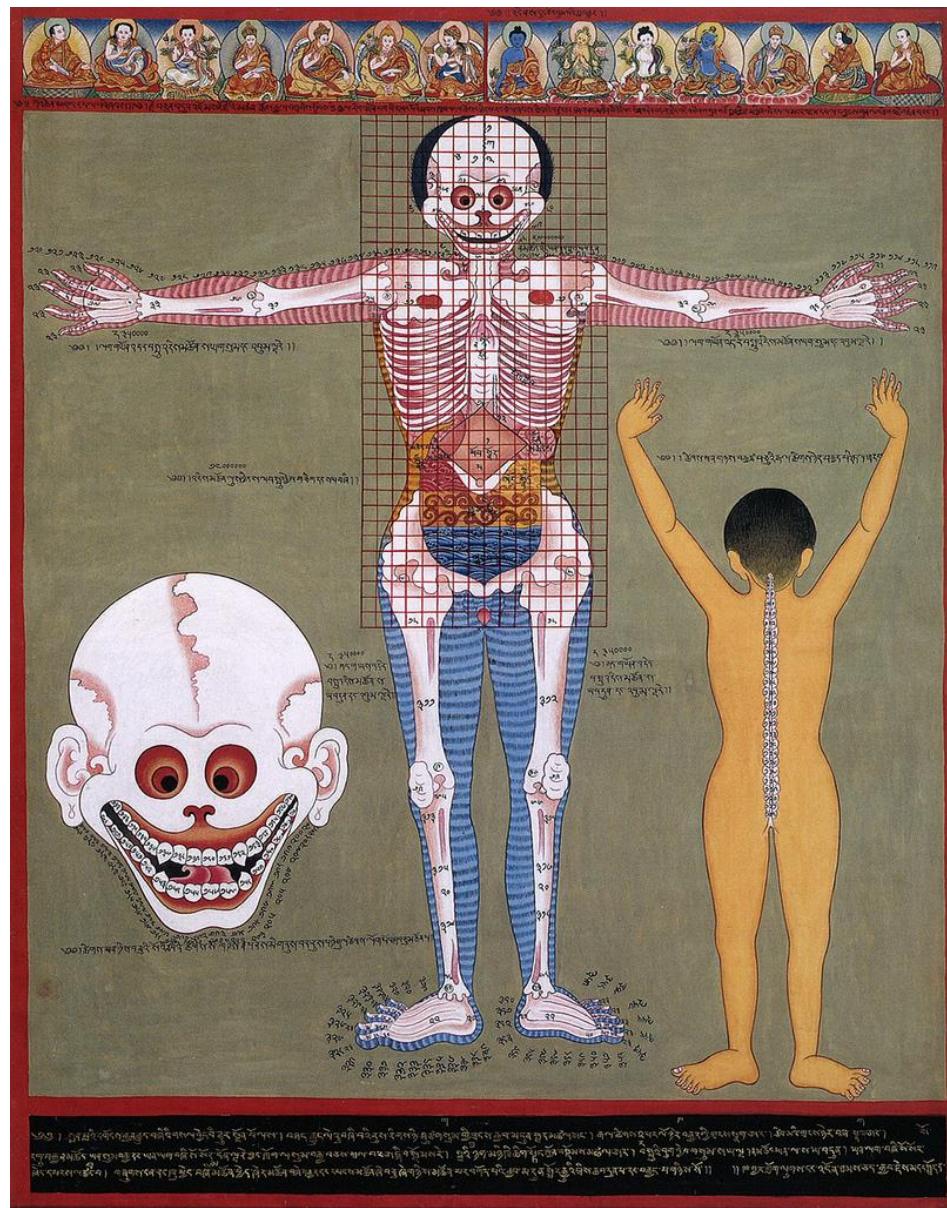


CTA/Durland Alternatives Library  
127 Anabel Taylor Hall  
Ithaca, New York 14853-1001  
[www.prisonerexpress.org](http://www.prisonerexpress.org)  
Change Service Requested

Non-Profit Organization  
U.S. Postage Paid  
Permit 448  
Ithaca, NY 14850

## Prisoner Express Spring 2018 Art Knows Nepal



An example of a thangka. I bought this in Kathmandu. It is a thangka showing the anatomic representation of the human blood vessels according to traditional Tibetan medicine. I will explain thangka later in the newsletter. I bought this at the monkey temple which I describe below.

**Hello or Namaste** (pronounced na-mas-tay; and meaning “I see the God within you.”

Thanks for being part of this 2018 winter art newsletter!

In this newsletter I hope to share with you both the rich art of Nepal and my experiences on an artist's residency in Kathmandu, Nepal. Despite how that sounds – **wow! A month in Kathmandu!** - it was a stressful time and I'm not sure how successful I will be able to convey this. Therefore, some of the information I will share with you will be supplemented by research that I have done after returning from Nepal.

Before leaving for the trip, I had very little in expectation. I knew nothing about Nepal. What I did know when boarding the plane traveling 7618 miles from United States to Nepal is that there were a studio in which to work and an apartment in which to live at the other end of the plane ride. I did not have a clear picture in my mind of the studio or apartment. My husband was awarded this artist residency and I was the “tag-along spouse.” The residency did not cover the cost of my studio and this was an additional cost to the trip. Nor did it cover food or the several vaccinations advised by the Center for Disease Control.

**WHAT IS AN ARTIST RESIDENCY?** Artist residencies are places throughout the world inviting artists to spend time creating art in a foreign place than the artist is used to creating art. Foreign does not necessarily mean foreign country – just a place different than where the artist typically works. Often these residencies are in exotic places offering the artist a unique experience to find different inspiration from their everyday lives. There are residencies in the Antarctic; a residency on a container freighter crossing the ocean; a residency in a tree house in Scotland; and so on. I'm surprised that someone hasn't developed an artist residency in a prison.



*Artist residency program where the artist lives in one of these containers for the purpose of creating art.....hopefully the food is good.....*

The difficulty in residency programs (for me) is I don't see myself working as well in a strange studio as I can in my own studio. Having my own studio in New York for 19 years, I have all sorts of power tools, a fully equipped printmaking studio, a bronze foundry, materials for painting, making clay, and lots of space. My studio is 53 feet by 24 feet. Of course, one never has enough space; creating art is like gas – it immediately fills the space, no matter what size.

I have always preferred traveling with a sketchbook; taking those sketches back to my studio where I can properly translate them into the mediums of painting, printmaking and sculpture. This has worked reasonably well for me. But the director of the Nepal residency program was intent on getting my husband into the residency. And it seemed like a good idea.....

Many artist residencies are geared to inviting several artists at the same time, housing them in the same building, and providing them with meals so that the artists do not have to interrupt their creative activities with mundane chores. In this way, the residency provides a community for the artist. Working as an artist can be isolating. Much of the time, an artist is alone. In my case, my husband has a studio 100 feet away from my studio (sometimes, not far enough away.....) and together we create our own community of art and criticism.....like.... **“Did you really want your painting to look like that?!”** Often we have students from the art school living with us. They live rent/food free and work in Gary's studio learning the craft of pouring bronze and creating sculpture.

Instead of a group residency, the residency in Nepal was only my husband. If I had not come along, he would have been alone, as had the two previous artists who were at the residency in the previous years. Madeline was the first artist, but unfortunately, she developed typhoid while in Nepal. Elizabeth came to Nepal the following year. She, too, felt stressed being alone in a third-world country and suffered a lot of anxiety there.

**WHERE IN THE WORLD IS NEPAL??** I am ashamed to admit I was not totally clear as to where Nepal was located before the residency. Nepal, with its rectangle shape, is surrounded on three sides by India. The fourth long side borders with China. It is a landlocked country with no access to any seas.

It does have a wonderful mountain range – the Himalayas with Mount Everest being the highest peak on the earth.



*The Himalayan mountains. The biggest industry in Nepal is the trekking tourism. Most people do not trek to the top of the mountain but to base camp at 17,600 feet high.. My sister did this the week before I arrived in Nepal. It took her 18 days to trek it.*

In Nepal, there are three religions: Buddhism, Muslim and Hindu. Nepalese art reflects all of these religions. The apartment in which we stayed was in the Hindu section of a major metropolitan area.

Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, is a large city with several suburbs. We lived in the suburb of Patan. It is misleading to call it a “suburb,”



*Samundra Man Singh Shrestha is Kathmandu-based artist. He is one of the most sought after Paubha artists in the country. Paubhas are painted on a rectangular piece of canvas. It is prepared by applying a mixture of buffalo glue and white clay on it. The surface is then rubbed with a smooth stone to give it polish. The painting is done according to the rules and dimensions handed down by tradition, and artists cannot exercise their creativity.*

The eyes of the deity are painted when the rest of the painting has been completed, and is known as "mikhā chāyeketu" (opening the eyes). Brocade is sewn to the edge of the paubha to make a frame for display. From a composition perspective, the surface of Paubha is usually occupied of a large figure in the center that is placed inside a shrine and surrounded by registers of smaller figures on the sides; the background is usually filled in with natural elements such as rocks rendered in abstract patterns. The color is often deep and subdued with subtle shadings of the figures and exquisite renderings of details that are the hallmarks of early Nepalese paubhas.

because suburbs call to mind the suburbs of United States. I knew that Patan couldn't look like an American suburbs, but I imagined a neighborhood of buildings surrounded by ground.... you know, places with backyards. Nothing could have been further than the truth.

But before I describe the apartment, I need to explain what Nepal has suffered through in the past 10 years. I didn't know this when I went over – why didn't I do my homework???

### **The Suffering of Nepal:**

**The Nepalese Civil War** was an armed conflict between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) and the government of Nepal, fought from 1996 to 2006. The rebellion was launched by the CPN-M on 13 February 1996 with the main aim of overthrowing the Nepalese monarchy and establishing a People's Republic. It ended with the Comprehensive Peace Accord signed on 21 November 2006.

More than 19,000 people (including both civilians and armed forces) were killed during the conflict, including 4,500 Nepalis killed by Maoists from 1996-2005, and 8,200 Nepalis killed by government forces from 1996-2005. In addition, an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 people were internally displaced as a result of the conflict.

The war ended in 2006 when the monarchy was overthrown and Nepal became a republic in 2008. Once that happened, artists also came together and declared an "art revolution" in Nepal.

One of the artists coming out of the revolution is **Hit Man Gurung** (born in 1986, in Nepal) The name "Hit Man" means "wise and helpful man" in Nepalese. He is an artist whose works is bringing out the

social problems in Nepal as in the following painting, "**How Long Do I Have To Hold My Breath?**"



*How Long Do I Have To Hold My Breath?*

This work involves portraits of 100 people from different age groups, ethnicities, work backgrounds and geographical locations who are living permanently or temporarily in Kathmandu. It asks the question: Why do people use masks? How do they feel when they wear one?

Unfortunately, after the civil war was over, the troubles for Nepal didn't stop. In April 2015, Nepal had a major earthquake. The earthquake killed nearly 9,000 people and injured early 22,000. It was the worse natural disaster to hit Nepal since an earthquake in 1934. The earthquake triggered an avalanche on Mount Everest killing 21.

Hundreds of thousands of people were made homeless with entire villages flattened. Some of the shrines around the main historic square (Durbar Square) were destroyed. Durbar Square was where the Patan Museum was located and where we had our studios. By the time we arrive, the museum had been restored as had the studios. But the shrines surrounding the museums still had the scaffolding for repair.



*Patan Museum immediately after the earthquake in 2015*



*This is a drawing I did of the back of the Patan Museum. The museum had a garden. Sitting in the garden seemed far from the crowds just beyond this building. This was the only place in Kathmandu without scooters trying to knock me down....the scooters are everywhere-honking all the time.*

The apartment in which I stayed was five stories high surrounded by buildings that had been destroyed by the earthquake. The apartment overlooked a courtyard that had a Hindu shrine and a large water tank. Because most of the apartments in the neighborhood did not have running water, the neighborhood women would fill jugs of water from the plastic cistern each morning. The neighbors would then drag rugs out onto the pavement; the women sat in one corner of the

courtyard talking while the men would play a game resembling Parcheesi in another corner.

Outside my kitchen window a family lived on a porch – or at least their eating area was on the porch. Their living area was about five feet away from the kitchen. (Many families were displaced by the earthquake and had to live in tents.) I think the family who lived on the porch had a small family business making Hindu statutes for the tourists and all day long they would hammer on the porch.



*Statutes made for the tourist market. These are not Hindu statutes but Buddha statutes. Maybe these were made by the family on the porch.*

Because the studios in which we worked were located in the Patan Museum, approximately three blocks away from the apartment, we walked the winding narrow alleys to the museum passing these market stalls.

On the way to the museum, there was a thangka studio. There were many more thangka studios located throughout the city in which artists make art for the tourist. Thangkas are made for the tourist trade.

**TIME FOR NEPALI ART HISTORY! So what is a thangka (or tangka) anyway?** Wikipedia writes:

A tangka is a Tibetan Buddhist painting on cotton or silk usually depicting a Buddhist deity, scene, or mandala. Tangkas are traditionally kept unframed and rolled up when not on display, mounted on a textile backing somewhat in the style of Chinese scroll paintings, with a further silk cover on the front. Most thankas are relatively small, comparable in size to a Western half-length portrait, but some are extremely large, several feet in each dimension; these were designed to be displayed, typically for very brief periods on a monastery wall, as part of religious festivals. Most thankas were intended for personal meditation or instruction of monastic students. They often have elaborate compositions including many very small figures. A central deity is often surrounded by other identified figures

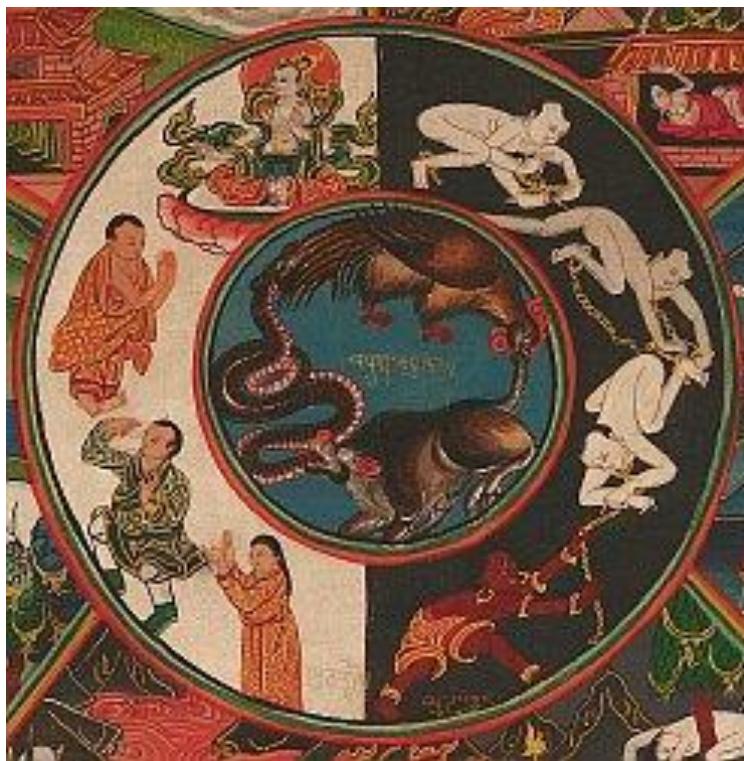
in a symmetrical composition. Narrative scenes are less common, but do appear.

### Thangka examples:

Mandala thangkas: The word Mandala means “circle.” A mandala represents wholeness, a cosmic diagram reminding us of our infinity, extending beyond and within our bodies and minds.



*The Holi Sri Yantra, also known as Sri Chakra, is a very important symbol of the Hindu philosophy known as Tantra. It is composed by nine triangles of different size overlapping with one another.*



*A living thangka reflects a narrative guide for good living.*

We ended up not buying the thangka at the neighborhood shop. Gary looked carefully at them and decided that the thangkas were not

actually painted by an artist, but printed for mass production. Instead we visited a thangka studio when we visited the Monkey Temple.

The Monkey Temple (the name of the temple is Swayambhunath, but who can say that outside of Nepal) is one of the holiest Buddhist temples in Nepal. It is said to have evolved spontaneously when the valley was created out of a primordial lake more than 2,000 years ago. This stupa is the oldest of its kind in Nepal and has numerous shrines and monasteries on its premises. Stupa is a dome-shaped structure built as a Buddhist shrine.



*Three clay sketches I made after visiting the Monkey Temple.*



## WHO ARE SOME NOTABLE ARTISTS FROM HISTORY IN NEPAL?

Chitrakar is a caste within the Newar community of Kathmandu. The Newar caste is divided according to profession. Chitrakar were painters and mask makers. Chitrakars fell in the lower rung of the caste hierarchy. The word Chitrakar is Sanskrit for "image maker." Their names end with the word "Chitrakar." In the middle 1800's these artists were influenced by western realism.

**TEJ BAHADUR CHITRAKAR**, (1989-1971) is known for his extraordinary strong display of academic strength, and was influenced from working from life rather than the traditional rules of historic Nepali art. This is an important difference – working from life rather than from ideals based upon rules.



Notice how this art of Nepal developed a western realism. It is based upon what the artist sees and personal vision instead of religious instruction.

**RAJ MAN SINGH CHITRAKAR** (IAST rāja māna simha citrakāra) (1797-1865) was a Nepalese artist in the mid-19th century who

worked for the British and Nepalese courts producing a large number of pictures. He especially contributed to the illustration of natural history subjects, particularly birds, and in his watercolor painting he introduced European styles into a traditional scene dominated by votive art. Raj Man Singh was the first to apply the Western concepts of lighting and perspective, and is credited for the appearance of three-dimensional effects in Nepalese painting.

Raj Man Singh was born in Kathmandu to a family of hereditary artists, the Newar caste of Chitrakar. Accordingly, he engaged in painting paubha paintings and other religious art. He came to the attention of Brian Houghton Hodgson, the British Resident stationed in Kathmandu who was also a scholar of the religions, languages, literature, ethnology and zoology of the Himalaya. Hodgson was looking for an artist to make watercolor paintings of the birds and mammals he was studying for his collection, and he hired Raj Man Singh to do them.

Under Hodgson's guidance, Raj Man Singh who was used to painting pictures of deities as per ancient texts, mastered the new technique of observing subjects in their natural habitat and making lifelike representations on paper. He produced thousands of works of remarkable quality for Hodgson from the 1820s to the 1850s.



Raj Man Singh Chitrakar

## Nepalese Contemporary Artists

I have mentioned some contemporary artists. What describes Nepali art today? Traditional Nepalese art is renowned for its quaint, religious aesthetic, reflective of the country's rich cultural heritage and the fusing of Buddhist ideology with Hindu representation. But as mentioned before, contemporary art in Nepal tends towards socio-political issues. Particularly, since the country has been ravaged with war and is now one of the most polluted countries in the world (at least the metropolitan areas)

The government is filled with corruption. There is required payback to government for anything a citizen receives from the government. For instance, the cab driver who drove Gary (husband Gary, not Gary Fine) and me from the airport, said that he could not get a governmental-issued tent for his family to live in after the earthquake because he couldn't afford the kickback the governmental officials demanded for granting people tents. Therefore, it is not surprising that artists are manifesting this civil unrest in their work.

This unrest was present in the work of Manish Harijan.

### **MANISH HARIJAN, born in Nepal, 1986**

Manish Harijan work is inspired by a childhood of hardship, social domination, cast discrimination and poverty. He sees his work as the voice of the speechless population. He tries to represent this in a contemporary way. In an exhibition in 2012, he presented the below painting, Super Kali, a representation of the goddess (the violent goddess of change) dressed in a miniskirt, giving the middle finger. This exhibition was closed down by right-wing Hindu fundamentalists who objected to the use of the goddess in this way.



*Super-Kalli – Manish Harijan*



*Another Manish painting*

### **GOPAL KALAPREMI SHRESTHA**

Gopal is a quiet man in his mid 50's (I think) who is considered the primary ceramic artist in Nepal. Gary and I visited him at his house/studio in Kathmandu; which included several studios and a kiln for firing the pottery. At the time of our visit, he was preparing an

exhibition of terracotta chess pieces. The chess pieces were about 2 feet high. I think he had about 30 pieces of these chess players. I particularly liked his pottery of ceramic masks



*Gopal ceramic sculpture*

**PHURBA NAMGAY, born Bhutan, 1964 (Bhutan is close to Nepal; a thin strip of India separates them); A modern thangka artist**

Phurba Namgay is a master painter whose murals can be seen in temples and monasteries throughout the kingdom of Bhutan. He is an instructor at the Institute for Zorig Chusum of thangka painting and rimo (drawing). Artworks produced by Namgay represent some of the

best examples of contemporary Bhutanese thankas and mandalas. Phurba Namgay uses the traditional methods of thangka painting that include hand mixing natural pigments and creating brushes of natural animal hairs. The exhibition at the Visual Arts Center will include traditional thangka paintings and new contemporary paintings that explore the artist's journey from Bhutan to the United States.



*Phurba Namgay's rockets and dragons thangka*



*detail of Namgay's thangka*

#### **SHUSHMA SHAKYA, printmaker**

We were also able to meet Shushma while she taught a printmaking workshop.

Shushma Shakya was born in Kathmandu, Nepal in 1975. Her interest in artwork, though started at a young age, took shape while studying for a management program where she learned about fine arts. She then joined the Fine Arts College in Kathmandu, where she received a degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts (Painting) and also a Diploma in Fine Arts.

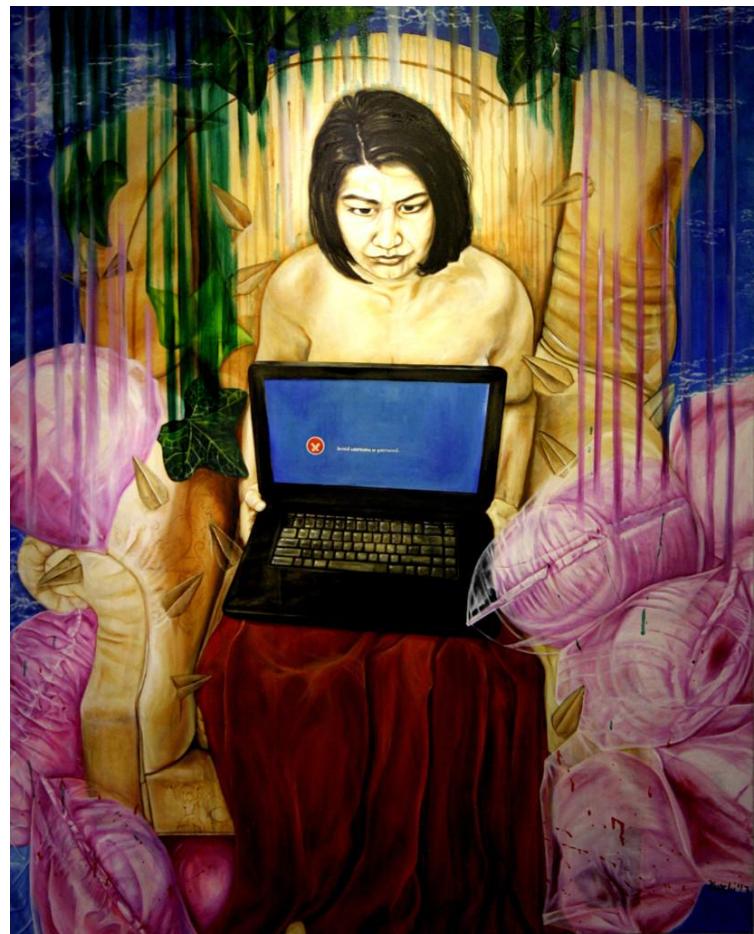
Shakya's art work presents the prevalent situation of the ecosystem, particularly in the context of the degraded conditions of vegetation and animals caused by human interference. Her paintings bring out the methods for "the coexistence of creatures and humans on this planet".



*Sushma Shakya – “Celebration”, acrylic on canvas*

#### **KURCHI DASGUPTA, currently living in Nepal, born 1974 West Bengal**

Kurchi Dasgupta (born 1974 in Kolkata, West Bengal) is an Indian painter, writer and translator. She currently lives in Kathmandu, Nepal,<sup>[1]</sup> where, in April 2008, she was witness to the abolition of the monarchy which had reigned in Nepal for 240 years and the transformation of Nepal into a federal democratic state.

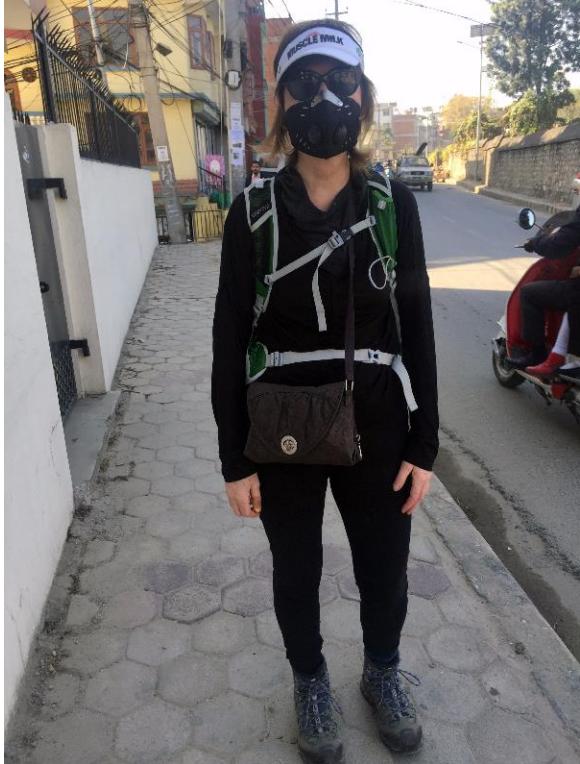


*Kurchi Dasgupta, “access denied” - acrylic on canvas*

## CONCLUSION OF TRIP:

Now that I am back in United States, the stress of being in Kathmandu becomes fuzzy; making me wonder – why was it so stressful being there? I guess the statement “when stress is gone, one forgets” is true. However, I am glad for the opportunity in this newsletter to review some of the artists in Nepal. I wished I had known more about Nepal’s art before going over. It may have made more sense to me.

The pollution in Kathmandu is terrible. (There is no city in United States that equals the amount of pollution.) It is something that the citizens have to put up with – many die every year from respiratory problems.



*When I go out, I really like to suit up. Here I am with my respirator. I hadn't thought pollution could be so bad and I didn't wear a respirator for the first couple of days. But then I developed such a bad cough and fluid in my ears that I had vertigo. I love to walk around cities sketching what I see, but I couldn't walk at all in Kathmandu. I could manage walking to the museum a couple of blocks away from the apartment and to the food store a couple blocks in the opposite direction.*

Pollution in Nepal is a big problem. Then there is the problem of getting sick from the water. Water is a precious thing – something I forgot. The water was bad in Kathmandu. On our first day there, I got sick eating off dishes that were washed in the water, necessitating me to take antibiotics. Because I didn't want to continue taking antibiotics, we decided not to eat out but cooked in the apartment; limiting our diet to rice and more rice. I think I lost about 8 pounds. Because the water was bad, I spent much of the day just boiling water. It was supposed to be ok to wash with, but because the water came out of the faucet as a strange shade of green-yellow, I had my doubts. It didn't help that I cut my hand with the armature in making a sculpture. Staring at my cut hand and the green-yellow water coming out of the faucet reminded me of a strange story my neighbor told me before

leaving for Nepal - a story I had initially dismissed. His friend's sister cut her foot in Nepal; a seemingly simple cut, but then died in Kathmandu of an infection.

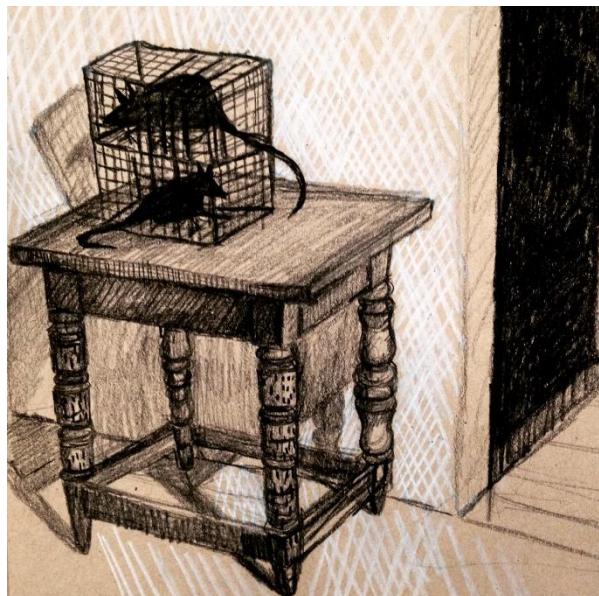
My sister was in Nepal before I got there. We had originally planned to trek together outside Kathmandu, but those plans fell through. The day that I arrived in Nepal, my sister flew back to United States. By the time she reached Untied States (completing the 30 hours of traveling), she was in the full swing of meningitis. Apparently, she caught meningitis while trekking up the Himalayans. She stayed 9 days in the hospital.

My sister's illness made for an uncomfortable introduction to Nepal. I think had she not gotten sick, I might have been less stressed.

Someone told me, “Biblical diseases are eradicated from everywhere in the world except Nepal.” I don’t know if this is true. But (in addition to Madeline getting typhoid when she was on the residency two years earlier; and my neighbor upstairs in the apartment who developed meningitis, the bubonic plague and amoebic dysentery) the possibility of developing disease was a constant restraint. I developed respiratory problems from the pollution - the Kathmandu cough – and vertigo (dizziness) from the subsequent fluid in my ears. And we were alone with no community to help us determine what was ok and what was not ok; what could we eat and what should we stay away from.

Working in the studio helps stress, but my empty Kathmandu studio with no tools did not diminish the stress. (Of course, I don’t expect you to have much sympathy knowing how little art supplies are in prison.)

For the first couple of days I focused upon a rat-trap I bought in a Kathmandu market stall. Focusing upon the details of the trap reminded me of some of the detailed art I received from you (generally speaking) and I realized that focusing upon details gives a stabilizing force that I had not considered before. In art school, I was taught **not to get caught in the details** – that the artist fails to see the ‘forest for the trees’ when details become more important. I do believe this is true, but sometimes one can get lost in the details and that can be reassuring.



Gary and I as rats in a trap.

The most exciting part of Nepal for me was meeting people on the streets - the average person working in an auto shop or selling in the one of the stalls. The people were so friendly and open in talking with us. They seemed to possess little mistrust of Gary and I; just people welcoming us. I felt bad that they had to live in such pollution. Just as I was affected by the pollution, the people are affected by it every day, and unlike me who can leave, they cannot. This friendliness of the people has a powerful affect on most visitors to Nepal. It is something that I heard repeatedly – “the people are so warm in Nepal.” And I agree.

And then there were the pigeons. When I finally settled on working in the studio, I focused on the pigeons outside my studio window. Perhaps I didn't go far from what I already do in my studio back home, but – oh well.



*Kathmandu pigeon (clay)*

#### Drawing a personal *thangka*:

#### Modernizing the *thangka*:

How do you make the *thangka* relevant to your own situation even if you have no connection to eastern religion?

Modern Nepal artists are using the medium of *thangka* to make art not as a religious statement but as personal statement:

Tsherin Sherpa is a Nepalese artist who explores contemporary themes through his neo-traditional approach to *thangka* painting. Born in Kathmandu he studied with his father, Master Urgen Dorje, a renowned Tibetan *thangka* artist. However, Tsherin eventually incorporated the *thangka* into his own style allowing his own experiences – the earthquake of Nepal, the war, pollution – becomes imagery in the *thangkas*.



*Tserin Sherpa – "Oh, my goddess"*

#### How would you compose your personal *thangka*?

Would it be geometric as in a mandala



or depicting scenes of your life?

What colors?

There are different kinds of color composition for of thangkas:

- painted in various colors
- thangkas with a black background
- thangka painted with a gold background
- thangkas painted with a red background

On what materials?

Some are painted on paper, some on cotton

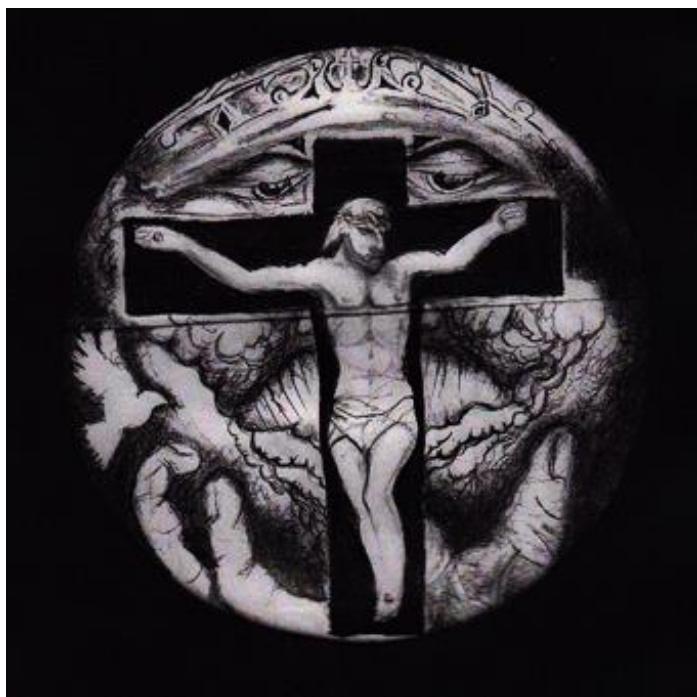
What is the central image in your thangka?

Often it is a deity, but a modern thangka does not have to be religious as in Namgay's thangka of rockets and dragons. What would you create as your central figure or scene? Is it you, your mother, or a superhero, or an animal?

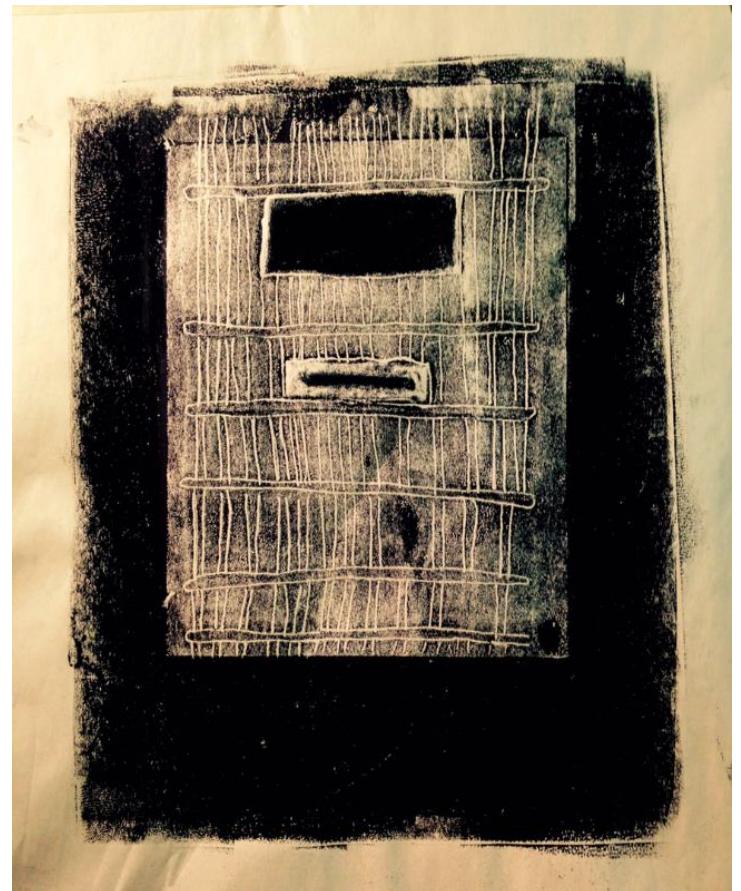
What surrounds the central image?

Modern thangkas depict everyday living or socio-political issues. Would you draw from the prison life? How would you incorporate your experiences in prison into the thangka? How would you draw imagery from the life you had before prison? How would you combine these lives? Or the life you see yourself having in ten years? What issues would you include? Racism, sexism, poverty, love, hate.

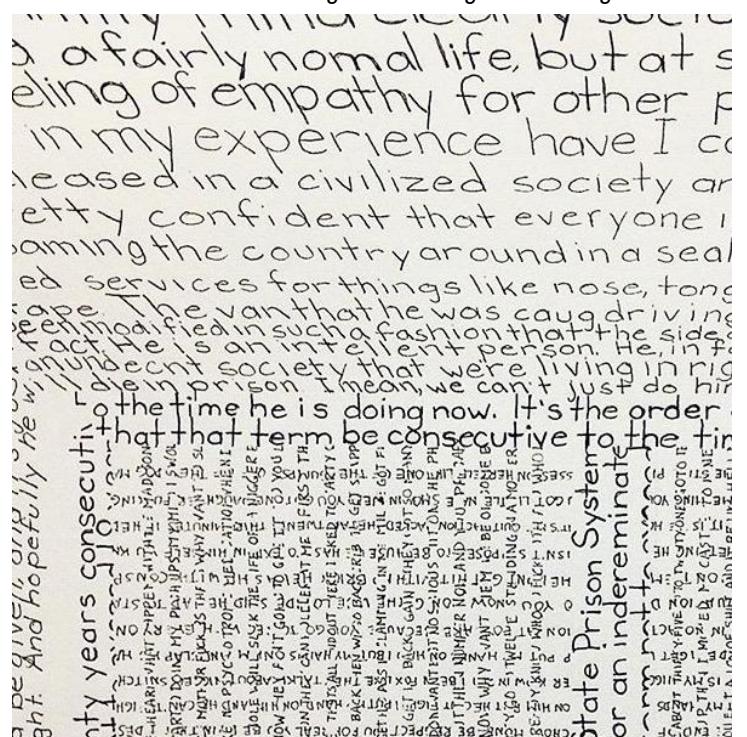
The following images of prisoners are not thangkas, but these works by prisoners suggest to me ideas for a thangka – a basis for some imagery that could be included.



Christopher Bujanda. I love how Christopher created not a "linear" image (with images side by side in a typical picture) but superimposes the images upon one another. Thus creating a mystical sense that living exists out of time and space.



Arthur Tyler lived on death row for 31 years until the state decided they didn't have enough evidence to keep him there. When Arthur was released into general, he was a student in my prison art class. I asked him to draw three things that were constant in his life for 31 years. He drew a door, bed, and a toilet. This is Arthur's drawing of his death row door. It is a very powerful image and has been seen on the internet. I have received emails asking about it from reporters. It would also be a strong central image for a thangka.



This is a word composition by Dominic Marak. I am not sure if words have been used in a thangka, but I can see words as a beginning in a

*design with imagery developed around, over or intertwined with the words. Or just creating a interesting and mysterious design like dominic has in this work where the verbal is changed into the visual and then hovers between the two – is it to be deciphered or just seen as visual patterns?*

---

#### FURTHER QUESTIONS ABOUT ART FOR YOU AS PRISONERS.

Questions have been floating around about ownership of artwork created in prison. Does a prisoner own his work, or does the prison own it? I am compiling a list for Prisoner Arts Coalition (an independent space and national network providing information and resources for people creating art in and around the American prison system. This is different from Prisoner Express in that PAC is a resource project instead of actually doing programming like Prisoner Express) of the different state rules for selling your artwork. Please let us know what are the state and prison requirements for selling your art work. Can you sell your artwork, does the prison take a percentage of the sale, and so on. (This is not to confuse you – **Prisoner Express does not sell artwork.** Selling becomes too complicated and we cannot afford to send work back. We can exhibit your artwork and keep it as part of the prisoner art archive and continue to develop venues to have it shown to the public.)

#### Animation project:

I am working on the animation project and hope to get it out in the mail soon. (If you signed up for this, you probably received a letter from me in January.). If you want to be part of this animation and haven't notified us yet, please let us know.

That's all folks!!