

Aasim Akhtar talks to Navjot Altaf

By Aasim Akhtar

Navjot Altaf is an artist from India, Mumbai and has participated in the network variously. She was part of International Artists' Workshop, Gadani, Pakistan 2006.

Navjot Altaf is a multi-faceted artist. She has been involved with interactive/cooperative/collaborative installation projects with Indian and international visual artists, classical vocalists, documentary filmmakers, craftspersons and technicians. Simultaneously, since 1997, she has been engaged with ongoing site-oriented art projects in collaboration with Adivasi (tribal) artists from Bastar Chhattisgarh in Central India. The process deals with the questions related to site specificity and cooperative art activity as a strategy.

Married to the artist/mentor Altaf Mohammadi, Navjot now lives in Mumbai. The following interview was conducted in Karachi during her visit to Pakistan as a participating artist in the Vasl Workshop at Gaddani Beach.

Q: How did you decide to become an artist?

A: I knew I wanted to be an artist from a very young age. My father who was in Civil Defence Administration, took us to Dalhousie for a year from Meerut in 1963. That one year away from school activity made it clear to me and my family that I wanted to explore painting. My father was interested in writing poetry and my uncle, Nand Avatar went to Santiniketan where he studied under Tagore, became a poet writing in Urdu, and took out a magazine from Ludhiana. My father had a British professor in BSc in Lahore who inspired him to paint. As a child I saw a number of his landscapes that he had to leave behind around Partition in 1947. When you are left in an environment where you can discover things on your own, it helps to know yourself.

Q: So Dalhousie is where you discovered your true vocation.

A: Back in Meerut, my father sent us to a Bengali school as opposed to the convent where most middle-class officials sent their children because he thought the cultural environment at the former was richer. A number of teachers there had come from Santiniketan. Our principal was also quite progressive who had brought everything under an umbrella to allow students to learn. Upon my

father's insistence, I took up Hindi literature, English and Psychology after the 10th grade, and learnt to play sitar.

I must be 17 when my father wanted to send me to Delhi for art education but I didn't want to stay up north because even at that age, one could feel the kind of sexual harassment girls have to go through. I don't know on what grounds I chose to go to Bombay where I landed up at Sir J J School of Art in 1967. My understanding of the city at that point was that of a sprawling urban metropolis – the centre of cosmopolitanism. The exposure obviously came from Femina, the Illustrated Weekly, etc.

Q: How did J J help you realise your potential?

A: I was excited that I was in Bombay. Every Saturday one would watch exhibitions – something that may not have been possible had one been in a smaller town. Secondly, I could move around alone; and thirdly, artists like Gaitonde, Bendre, Hussain, Mehta and Hebbur who one had been looking at in reproduction, one could finally see in the flesh. At the college level, emphasis was on conceptual art. Paul Klee and Joan Miro inspired me a great deal. Miro was drawing a lot from African tribal art. The theoretical understanding of art, however, came much later when I learnt about Cubism.

Q: How did you chance upon Altaf Mohammadi?

A: Altaf first came to the J J with Nalini Malani to talk to the students there. He had just come back from England. I saw his exhibition at the Pavement Art Gallery, started by Nelson, but the municipality dismantled the show because it lacked vision that the space outside Jehangir Art Gallery could be used for showing the works by younger artists.

Showing at alternative spaces could be as important as showing at mainstream private galleries. I found a lot of contradictions in what Altaf and his colleagues had had to say about the establishment and how the artists needed to show at public spaces, etc. For example, when I saw Nalini show her work at the Pundole, I was taken aback. Altaf and I sat down for a cup of tea when he talked about certain leftist/progressive ideals that made sense to me. I was brought up on humanist values myself. What I had not been brought up on was to look at things critically: we tended to accept whatever people offered. It was Altaf's quotations and his presence that began to attract me to him.

Q: What were your earlier issues as an artist?

A: I was looking basically at content-oriented art and at alternative spaces but, obviously, in the absence of such spaces, almost always ended up in public galleries. Showing at Jehangir Art Gallery was a conscious choice where anybody, other than the collector, the regular art-goer and the artist, could walk in. Even though shows not organised by the activists flopped at the alternative fora, we still continued to show at slums, schools and colleges. Till the late 1970s, I was more interested in people's struggle, in children as adults in an urban environment. Since then I've been interested in women's issues, dealing with women of my own class - the upper middle-class. At that point we'd also shifted from an individual house to a cooperative housing society flat where I could actually see many more women taking pride in their husbands' jobs. The criticism I confronted from my Marxist friends was that I was becoming too individualistic. I thought it was important for me to reflect on my own being.

Q: How did the riots in Bombay in '93 result in your very first collaboration?

A: Until 1989, I had been painting but I felt that my paintings were becoming passive even though I had tried to make them expressionistic. My style was dry brush, and the quietness of it bothered me. I was also upset about the fact that painting had become a commodity and that people were only interested in what could be consumed.

Then I got invited by a group to make interactive work with graphic designers. One did not have to know the technology so well; it was the idea one had to explore. I had already been questioning the role of painting and the artist's signature. The project named 'State of the Art' was about making one's own work on a computer so that anybody, anywhere could access it freely, take out a print and possess a work of art without a signature. But in the end, they took the work to England, printed it on 10'x8' canvases, brought it back to Bombay to get the artists brush it up by putting in a personal touch, and to sign it so that it could become individualised.

The same group invited me back to make sculptures for utility. The idea was to make furniture objects, make editions that could be made available not only to the collectors but to anybody who was interested. But again, the exhibition was presented in a gallery space. The work was bought only by the collectors and no editions were ever made.

Q: What did that lead you on to?

A: I got interested in interactive/collaborative installation art which led me to work with people without representing people. Leela Bhagwat composed a 'bandish' and especially sang about one's relationship to the house when it's totally destroyed and when there is no place to go. The filmmakers who collaborated on the project were Madhushree Datta, Soma Jossan and Saitalwad. I felt all of us made a collective statement through our works.

After that I worked on a couple of other projects like 'Images Redrawn' in which I collaborated with a male sculptor from the J J. He used to make very interesting stereotypical figurines of dancing women, Mary and Christ, etc, to sell on the roadside. He was quite open for a Muslim but somewhere along our line of collaboration he asked me why I had been so bothered to sculpt the female form when I should have taken interest in daggers, poor people, etc. He had problems in creating *certain parts* of the body. Having drawn from Mayan, Indian and African sources, my interest was in shifting paradigms of sexuality. Mr Siddiqui had no problem in carving out a dancing woman but when it came to exploring the archetypal and making it part of the contemporary expression, he hesitated.

Q: What took you to Bastar, Madhya Pradesh in '95?

A: My Adivasi colleague, Jaidev Baghel, who I had known since the '70s, came over to Bombay. He saw my wooden sculptures and invited me to Bastar where he had a huge studio and a tradition of working in wood. The visit culminated in 'Through the Binoculars' in which I made the statement that as I am observing people from other cultures, I am being observed too. Binoculars work both ways. Those who wanted to have a contact with me came closer while others kept away out of doubt. I met a number of artists there trained at Shilpigram, sponsored either by the government or by handicrafts boards. They were producing art *en masse*. It became clear during conversations with them that they got neither time nor opportunity to experiment.

Perhaps they did want to experiment because they were inspired by the contemporary situation. But Jaidev showed me a piece of sculpture that he had done as an experimental piece when he was inspired to see contemporary art at the Bharat Bhavan. It got rejected when he sent it for selection. They said, "It can't be Jaidev Baghel's!"

The institutions will always expect you to do stereotypical work or continue doing what you've always done. When I came back I found a letter from the India Foundation for the Arts inviting proposals. We got a scholarship of Rs.5 lacs for one year. I went back to Bastar under the Art Collaboration Programme. We all worked side by side and wanted to bring our work to a mainstream gallery. We called it 'Modes of Parallel Practice'. After travelling six months, we all got together, bought wood to work, made sculptures, saw slides and films, etc. We were not making a joint commodity, so it was not a collaboration. The works were brought to Sakshi Gallery in Bombay, and later taken to the First Triennale at the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum in Japan. While we were working, I was invited to do a project in Bangkok for a seminar. They asked me to work on a project with women like Shantibai who knew everything but had only been a helper to her artisan husband.

Q: How do you respond to the decontextualisation of art/craft?

A: Anything borne out of an interactive process – be it urban, interstate or intercultural exchange where people from two different art practices are brought together – is very exciting. This kind of experimentation is exciting when the people make their choices themselves and know what they really want. Then, whether they want to paint on sofas or saris, I have no problem. It may not be a collaboration which is a much more complex exercise, and where the two must have a mutual choice and a common strategy.

A lot of socialites – the middlemen and the culture vultures – are trying to change the craft for the local market to help sustain the craftsman. What happens is that these middlemen start intervening and interfering. There should at least be some dignity to whatever is produced even in minimal facilities. If I saw Warli tribal paintings on cups and saucers, I would have problems.

Q: What is your stance on tribal/folk artists like Sonabai and Gangadevi getting invited to such exotic locations as Niigata in Japan and Brisbane in Australia to work *in situ*? How is it going to affect their own art practice or expression?

A: If we are saying they are contemporaries and that their art practice is a parallel art practice, then it doesn't matter which environment – urban or rural – the artist comes from. If Gangadevi is a living artist producing work today, she's a contemporary.

If you look at Januganh's case, it's different. He was invited to Japan to produce work on a stipend. Whatever he'd produce was to become the property of the museum. He was asked to stay longer and work longer hours when he requested the authorities to return his passport so that he could go home. His wife also sent in a telegraph requesting him to return immediately but the authorities were not sensitive enough to respect the need of the artist. Eventually, he committed suicide.

It's not just a matter of money invested by an organisation on an individual. Secondly, the artist's choice should also be respected. Thirdly, there should be a contact point especially on occasions when these artists feel vulnerable in a foreign environment.

Q: Tell us about your work at Gaddani beach?

A: Workshops are the time when you interact with people collectively and also individually. In many ways the work I did at Gaddani questioned "Are we communicating?" It was audio work in which each artist who I met at the workshop talked about certain issues. This way, it helped me know the people individually, learn about their perception of such workshop initiatives, and about how they want to interact with one another. Since I am interested in site-specific work, I would walk around the beach with guards all along. Every time I looked at the landscape, I'd felt that the huge boulder surrounded by water had been standing on its own. I thought may be I'll ask all the artists to imagine reaching its top because even during a low tide, one could not. And even if they reached there what is it that they would like to do. This is how I went about developing the idea further. Every artist found it funny. I wanted to see how they understood nature – are they going to dig a hole into the rock and be destructive or are they going to be real gentle. Prior to that I had already been to the ship-breaking yard in Gaddani, and seen a lot of insensitivity there – rusted iron lying around and the blue water, touching it. I did enjoy looking at the huge scraps but it reminded me of destruction like film sets of post-war societies.

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