

Gulammohammed Sheikh

A Retrospective of 70 Years of Printmaking

Part One: Hand Prints

Woodcut, linocut, etching-aquatint, lithography, silkscreen

Celebrated as a painter, poet, art historian and teacher, Gulammohammed Sheikh's long passion for printmaking is less known. This two-part retrospective looks at his printmaking practice from the 1950s to the present.

Part One is conceived as an archive, exploring Sheikh's handmade prints including his forays into little magazines using printmaking, and his interest in working collaboratively to democratise art and ideas. As a high school boy in Surendranagar in the early 1950s he illustrated and wrote for a handwritten literary magazine, *Pragati* (Progress), whose single copy would be kept on the local library table to peruse. It can be seen as a precursor to his later interests when as an art student in Baroda, he learnt printmaking and became active in Gujarati literary circles. He illustrated the avant garde literary magazine *Kshitij* (Horizon) with original linocuts by fellow artists alongside publishing poetry in free verse. His printmaking took an autobiographical turn in late 1960s when he also began writing his memoirs in free-flowing prose. After attending the landmark printmaking workshop in 1970 by Paul Lingren at USIS, Delhi, where he learnt aquatint, he became seriously interested in printmaking and bought his own etching press. Around the same time, he started the little magazine *Vrishchik* (Scorpio) with Bhupen Khakhar while teaching art history in Baroda, to initiate a dialogue among artists. Each issue had a print run of 500 copies with linocuts and lithographs as covers and pull outs. Sheikh later established the Chhaap Foundation workshop and residency with Kavita Shah and Vijay Bagodi in the late 1990s to popularise printmaking, offering facilities for etching, dry point, linocut, woodcut, and mono-print.

Starting out as a printmaker working within a modernist idiom, his work over the years, strongly informed by his literary and art historical interests, turned fabulist. Soon, with the advent of digital printmaking in India, he became one of the pioneers to seriously use the technology – and that will be surveyed in Part Two of the retrospective.

Gulammohammed Sheikh

A Retrospective of 70 Years of Printmaking

Part Two: Mind Prints

Digital works: *Mappa Mundi*

Sheikh began making digital prints in the New Media Art workshop held by the ARTunderground gallery in Baroda in 2001 where artists were given computers and facilitators. Always curious about new forms, he became intrigued by this medium which was 'fast' compared to the 'slow' processes of painting and printmaking. He was drawn to the 'ephemeral' and the 'concrete' facets of the medium: the tension between the image illuminated on the screen and the physical transformation of that image when realized as a print. He calls these *Mind Prints* because for him the computer 'replaces the hands with the mind, where the mind is central to finding, composing and making images.' While the *Hand Prints* extended the idea of the multiple by including original graphic prints into little magazines, in *Mind Prints*, Sheikh is constantly in search of new ways to make the machine serve his painterly purpose, by introducing artisanal aspects like hand painting to make his digital prints unique. In his large digital print mural done for the Mumbai airport he used kinetic elements. A state-of-the-art digital workstation forms part of his artistic tools today.

Around this time, during the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat, he and his family faced threats necessitating a temporary relocation from Baroda. However, as one of the foremost intellectuals of the country, Sheikh has not let himself be othered. He stands firmly at the centre and embraces the richness of the world. His digital works explode with brilliant saturated colours and quotations across geography and time. When a young art student in Baroda, he had come under the influence of Gujarati intellectuals like Bhogilal Gandhi, a Marxist turned Gandhian who ran a magazine called *Vishwamanav* (Universal Man) for which he wrote. The Gandhian ideal of the Universal Man who is firmly rooted but accepts no boundaries expands into the image of the *Mappa Mundi*, a medieval map of the world with which he creates new worlds - where Kabir, Majnu, Mary Magdalene; saints, angels and demons; poets and artists; figures from art history and legend - outsiders and rebels drowning in love and longing come together seeking a deeper spirituality.