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Shital Patel Interview

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Interviewer: Alark Patel
Artist: Shital Patel
Phone Interview Chicago
June 11, 2013

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 203: Art and Artists in Contemporary Culture during the 2013 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Art Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.



Interview Transcript:

Alark Patel: Tell me a little bit about yourself?

Shital Patel: I was born in Rockford, Illinois and I basically grew up there I lived here all throughout my childhood and all throughout high school. I did my undergraduate at UIC [University of Illinois Chicago] in marketing and management and I did a masters art

Artist Bio: Attempting, day and night, to live with a dash of color, creativity, and courage. Life is beautiful :)

Art, for me, is an exploration of my true self...with each work I come closer and closer to my own identity. It is a means through which I lose myself in a world of great wonder and amazement, only to emerge a few hours later rejuvenated, empowered, and slightly wiser than I was when I started.

My work attempts to merge the thoughts and ideals of my Indian culture with my life experiences as an American. I have been fortunate enough to gain the best of both of these nations, and without conscious choice my pieces reflect elements of both. I work mostly with acrylic, occasionally delving in oils; and always lean towards bold and unique color combinations as color theory is another major focus of my work as well.

Over the years, the paintbrush has become my lifelong companion, acting as teacher, friend, and comrade...listening to my innermost thoughts and feelings, gifting me with a deeper understanding of the universe and its workings, and helping me express my love of life to the world. Life lessons, spiritual quests, and the stories of ages have been told through art, I aim to tell my own story and give back to a world which has given so much to me.

- Bio from
<https://www.facebook.com/ShitalPatelInspiredForLife/info>

- Photo from
<http://www.rrstar.com/carousel/x231955176/Meet-the-Artist-Teacher-inspired-her-artistic-outlook#axzz2W0WNxT85>

education at DePaul University. After my son [Abhay] was born, I moved back to Rockford and I am currently still here.

AP: How did you get into art?

SP: Sometimes when I look back and think about the whole process, I feel like I was always kind of inclined to it, and slowly I would find more interest the more art classes I took. And then when I was high school I had a really great art teacher that kind of helped bridge the connection between how you are a person and expressing yourself through art. That was when I kind of realized that it was more than just a hobby and it was something that I truly loved a lot. You know, I felt like every time I start and sit down to paint and create something, I was learning something about myself. Then it became something different, . . . something internal, a spiritual process, you know as well as a way of expression and as time went on it just grew more and more. In undergrad I did marketing and management because I guess I felt like “okay I want to have more of a business degree” because back then being Indian it wasn’t really common to pursue an art degree. Nobody did that a lot back then, even if it was graphic design or things like that. I kind of felt hesitant to pursue art as a career. After I started working in the corporate world, that’s when I did a lot of rethinking, because I realized it really wasn’t my personality to working in a constricted, routine environment. So I decided to quit my job and go back to school to get an art education degree to just to kind of figure it out further. I knew I wanted an art backing and that I also knew that in the future at some point I would like to maybe get into teaching art history courses, so I pursued a Masters in Art Education at Depaul. Now I have a lot of time and freedom to create art, I really enjoy it and I don’t regret any of those decisions because I feel like it taught me a lot.

AP: How would you define or categorize your art?

SP: Well my focus is fine arts, acrylic and oil painting. The last couple years my artwork has been very bright and whimsical. I also always try to incorporate my culture in my art somehow. Before my son was born, my work was more Realism, now it is still as bright but whimsical and almost like children’s art. I’m still in that stage where I’m thinking of what appeals to children and the inspiration I have drawn from my culture and being a mother. I really like the new things that I have been coming up with and this new style that has emerged in me.

AP: How long have you been a practicing artist?

SP: I would say that for the last seven years I have been practicing as an artist. In terms of creating art, it has been much longer, but with it has been about six to seven years with a professional focus.

AP: You said earlier that culture plays a big role in your art. Would you define yourself an Asian American artist? Or how would you define yourself in a cultural aspect?

SP: That is a good question. I have not really thought of myself as an Asian American artist. I guess I have always thought [of myself] as an Indian. I take a lot of pride in also being American and I love this country, what it has given to me and recognize how being an American has shaped who I am. But I guess when I think of what I believe in, so much of it is drawn from my culture, so I think of myself as an Indian first. When I create my art so much of that history and values, so many elements are expressed in my art. Before I actually put anything on the canvas and I am driven from the inspiration I get from my culture. Recently, I did a series called “Patang” and it was inspired by the festival of Uttarayan, which is a kite festival in India. The series of paintings were drawn from this celebration of life and rejuvenation. It is a festival where everyone in the cities and villages are out on their rooftops flying kites and celebrating. So the series reflects these concepts of freedom, liberation, rejuvenation and really thinking about who is the master of our lives, and what that means. So culturally, I believe I am Indian before anything else.

AP: Cool. Have taken part in an exhibition before?

SP: Yes, I have a done a couple of them here in Rockford, I haven't done exhibition in Chicago but I have had some pieces of my artwork shown in different locations. Some of my paintings were hanging up in cafés, that where close to the city and stuff over the years and the same in Rockford. Last summer I did the Rockton Arts Fair, after that I participated in a show in downtown Rockford called “Dream Catcher.” After that, there have been some opportunities but I just started a new job as well so I've kind of put that on the back burner for a little bit. I am still creating art for myself. I feel like when I know there is a show or exhibition that's coming up [there is] a lot of mental and emotional prep work if I want to make a whole series to go into it. I am giving myself a bit more time before I get into another series of paintings with that focus. I have some ideas for a different series that I want to start in the near future, hopefully this year or so.

AP: What does being an artist mean to you?

SP: I think it took me a while to get myself to call myself an artist. When I think of that word, what does that even mean? Because when I think of artists, I think of these great people who created works that just stand still in time, and how can you call yourself the same thing and compare yourself to them? I don't know if I would call myself an artist. I guess I do right now because, you know, with what I do everybody calls themselves an artist...but I know for me it's a journey and a process and I honestly gain so much joy out the experience of creating. It's not just seeing something come to life, but it's more the journey of while I'm painting it while I'm creating it. One of the biggest moments for me was when I was taking this class. I had a really great teacher and it was a college class for my master's. I was working on my first oil painting and it was of the Indian flag.¹ It was kind of [a] crumpled Indian flag and the more [I] would focus on the little details, staring at this tiny space and just painting, it was probably just about [an] inch, I was thinking it's just a bunch of lines and it looks terrible and go on and on about it. And my professor walked by and told me to stand back and take a look at it because I just kept looking at this one tiny portion of the bigger picture. So I went to the other end of the room and I looked at it as a whole and that's when I realized what depths being an artist can take you to. While focusing on that tiny area I was so concentrated, lost in what I was doing, and taking the step back to look at it as a whole made me realize that it is when we are lost in something completely that we can reach pure joy—which to me is God. When you look at those tiny details and you think about how tough it is, and you stand back and you see this masterpiece of the universe and the masterpiece of humanity and that's kind of how it began to change for me where I thought of it as a completely amazing journey. When I think of being an artist, I feel like it is about the connection my life and values have with the work I create and how I experience that journey. So even if I wasn't painting, I attempt to live a beautiful and meaningful life, and I would like to call people who do so artists as well.

AP: What are you currently working on?

SP: Currently, I am not working on anything for a series or exhibition. I have been doing a lot of personal projects for myself, as well as some illustrations for a book that a friend of mine has written for my son. That is a fun project that I am excited about, so we will see where it goes.

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¹ To view an image of this work and to read more about Shital Patel, see Lisa Glowinski, "Meet the Artist: Teacher inspired Jefferson grad's artistic outlook," *Rockford Register Star*, January 25, 2010, <http://www.rrostar.com/carousel/x231955176/Meet-the-Artist-Teacher-inspired-her-artistic-outlook#axzz2W0WNxT85>.