Prem Sharma Interview

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Interviewer: Ester Lee  
Artist: Prem Sharma  
Phone Interview: Chicago, IL to Burr Ridge, IL  
Date: May 4th, 2011 1:30pm-2:11pm

Note: The following interview was conducted by a DePaul University undergraduate student enrolled in AAS 201: Asian American Arts & Culture during the 2011 Spring Quarter as part of the Asian American Oral History Research Project conducted by Laura Kina, Associate Professor Art, Media, & Design.

Prem Sharma in front of her painting, “Raging Bull”.

Artist Bio [by Ester Lee]: As a co-founder of Apna Ghar, Inc. (Our Home) a shelter for surviving women and children of domestic violence was founded in 1989, Prem Sharma also helped create the Club of Indian Women and the Indo-Crisis Line prior to this. Since moving to Chicago in 1972, Ms. Sharma has been actively involved with various South Asian organizations such as Chitrahar (South Asian television show), India Tribune, The Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, the Association of Indians in America, and the Indian Medical Association. An accomplished self-taught artist, Ms. Sharma has supported the arts and culture in Chicago's South Asian community and served as a member of the Governor's Advisory Council on Asian Affairs, the Illinois Arts Council, and the Alsdorf Gallery at the Art Institute of Chicago. Currently, Ms. Sharma serves on the Board of the Indo-American Heritage Museum. Ms. Sharma has been married to Dr. Umesh Sharma for 45 years. She also has a daughter, Monika, and a son, Sandeep, who is married to Jankhana. Ms. Sharma is the proud grandmother of grandson, Jayden. Sandeep, Jankhana and Jayden live in India. She spent time with her grandson last year for two months and she is more than happy to take care of him again now for a longer time period. She says, “I am watching him grow, which is very nice.” Which grandparent would want to miss their grandchildren growing up since they were born? She is very blessed and proud of her precious family.
Phone Interview Transcript

Ester Lee: What part of India are you from?

Prem Sharma: New Delhi, the capital of India, I would live there. I was born in 1943, yes haha I know a very long time ago.

EL: What was it like growing up there? How was it like over there while you were growing up?

PS: There was a big discrimination when I was growing up in India, while boys had all the choices, the girls did not have a lot of choices other than becoming teachers and doctors. It was nothing like being an artist. The girls really did not have the choice to work; there was a pressure for them to get married by a certain age. While I was growing up and I was always interested in the art and my mother would tell me to finish my regular graduate courses first then I will have plenty of spare time to work on art.

EL: So, she was really strict about your education and she did not really want you to be an artist and what did she want you to do then?

PS: She wanted me to become a doctor also.

EL: What did your parents do?

PS: My mother went to school only up to second grade but she was talented in art and that had some influence on me. My mother was a homemaker, she stayed back and took care of her eight children, raised all six of my brothers to become doctors and engineers and rest of the time she was doing social work. My father who was an IAS officer, worked for the Government of India in the Accounts Department, always encouraged us to participate in extra curricular activities. Sports, art and theater were my favorite activities I participated regularly even after my school days.

EL: How was the school system?

PS: OH! The school is very good actually. The education was really high and very good. There were just more extra curricular activities. I was in all kinds of things, I did sports and drama clubs and some art courses. I did not go for further training about the art. I learned it by myself.

When I came to Chicago, I had an opportunity to work with an artist and from him I learned about oil painting, that’s all. I mostly learned it myself.

EL: Do you remember that artist’s name?

PS: Dominick, I do remember his name.

EL: How did you find Dominick?

PS: I was looking for art supplies in an art store and there I saw a flyer about art classes in oil. I just got interested and took some lessons.

EL: What kind of art did you start off with? Like with 2d art or sculpting?
PS: I did mostly with painting of watercolors. My brother first introduced me to watercolors in India and that’s all I did in the beginning. Dominick taught me the techniques of oil paintings and how to paint without sketching. My knowledge of sculpting is limited to one class I took in College of DuPage.

EL: How would you describe your art?

PS: My art has gone through different stages and I have seen the changes. I consider myself as a contemporary artist, leaning towards surreal art. I started with realistic paintings. I have done some portraits and landscapes too; but I wanted to create more excitement in my painting so I started playing with vibrant colors of acrylics, inks and crayons, combining realism with abstract.

EL: When did you first become an artist?

PS: I remember when I was six or seven years old in India, I participated in a local art competition and my painting won first prize. I was surprised. But I think the artist in me was born at the time only. I wanted to continue painting but it was seen as a waste of time so I spent very minimal time on painting and kept it as my hobby. The same feeling persisted in me and it became my nature to give priority to my other jobs. In the sixties and seventies, India did not have good quality colors and brushes like what I could get here in the States. This was exciting, but by then I had two little kids at home, and without anyone’s help it was difficult to pursue my art, and the time went by. I did very few painting in those days but I learnt some techniques on my own.

EL: so around the 70’s that’s when you started?

PS: Yes, when both my children started going to school, I had little time when I could paint. I did a few paintings and took part in a local fair. Winning an award gave another boost to the artist in me.

EL: Would you say that your family was an inspiration for some of these paintings?

PS: My family and friends all like my artwork and encouraged me to paint on a regular basis. My children take away my paintings to their places in Chicago, Mumbai or San Francisco, so that I paint more. They know, I can’t stand empty walls; they are my biggest fans.

EL: What else would be your muse or another encouragement? Is there sometimes else that inspires you?

PS: Going to museums and seeing work of old masters inspires me a lot. Other artist’s work also motivates me and I want to try their techniques.

EL: So you would relax with it sometimes?

PS: Painting is a different form of meditation to me. I completely get lost in it and forget everything else, even to eat, sleep or shower.

EL: Tell me about your art gallery from 1993! Where was it located and what types of art were displayed?

PS: The gallery was located in Westmont, IL, it is close to where I currently live now and the building is still there. Well, it was only something that I did for one year. It was not just my own gallery but it was half a jewelry store and half an art gallery. It was a combination to start with from Asian point of view. A friend and I opened it up together and I closed after only a year because the customers were more
interested in the jewelry than art. The jewelry was not something that I designed but they were imported from India.

**EL:** Do you ever address Asians or Asian American identity, themes or histories in your artwork? If so, please give a specific example.

**PS:** On the occasion of 50th anniversary celebration of India’s Independence, I exhibited my pencil sketches and portraits of Asian Indian freedom fighters and scenes from India in Field Museum, Chicago; I was part of the Asian Indian Association representing Asian Indian history. South Asian - that is what a lot of people would identify me as and also would usually categorize my artwork with that identity. Mainly when I would present my artwork in the Illinois Art Council and when it was the Asian Heritage month, they would just specifically identify myself and my artwork as mainly an Asian American work of art.

**EL:** If so, was identifying as Asian/Asian American something that was also important to you personally? Please explain.

**PS:** Not that I thought being South Asian was something to be embarrassed about but I did not do a lot of work and show them at fairs. The reason was honestly, I was either too lazy or too busy. There were some art galleries or exhibitions that I would present my artwork and would be identified as an Asian American artist and it was something that only slightly bothered me. My artwork is not something that only represents Asian themes or styles. To me art is very neutral and it belongs to all. However, I did not really continue with my artwork on a full time basis because as an Asian woman your family comes first and I was mainly focusing on my family and I was very busy with taking care of them. My mother, who influenced me in art, also influenced me with her willingness to help anyone in need. I followed her lead and started a 24 hrs crisis hot-line. Later I co-founded a women’s shelter to help those South Asian women and children who were victims of domestic violence. It was something that I needed or wanted and was something that I enjoyed doing. However, I do regret not being able to continue with my work because art or painting was something that I have always wanted to do from my childhood.

**EL:** Are you currently working on anything, if so what is it?

**PS:** Yes! I am working on a painting of two horses, heads only, which I started sometime ago. I planned to donate this painting to raise funds for our shelter; instead I gave my other work “The Dancers” because I couldn’t finish this in time. My daughter has asked me to do some paintings for her newly renovated condo as well as for her new office. You can tell that I am going to be busy!

**END**