Still Hungry: Modern Metal Arts in Kathmandu

Rebecca Humphreys

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Still Hungry: Modern Metal Arts in Kathmandu
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Abstract
This study explores the working artistic life of a soon-to-be graduate of Kathmandu University School of Arts, Dipak Lama. Fieldwork was conducted in the Patan-area of Kathmandu while all of the studio-work was completed in Hattiban on the KU campus. This project attempts to provide a broad overview of how Dipak creates a model of a work with the hopes of having the full-size piece commissioned as public art.
Acknowledgements
First and foremost, I must thank Dipak Lama for agreeing to take me on as a student. His artistic
talent and familiarity with his medium never ceased to amaze me. Beyond that, his work ethic and
willingness to help all of his fellow classmates with other projects was a welcome change from
how I found much artistic practice back at my home institution. I will forever treasure afternoons
spent talking over tea at the university canteen or nearby cafes with Dipak, his friends, and the
students at KU. I would also like to thank Nazneen for her support and for introducing me to
Sharareh Bajracharya who gave me an overview of the Kathmandu arts scene, first mentioned
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Introduction

I came into this project with the hopes of being able to experience a full apprenticeship with an artist that worked with metal, and in that I succeeded. Dipak Lama, known as “Ironman” among friends and by many at the KU School of Arts campus, was more than I ever could have hoped for in a mentor. He was not only a patient teacher but also a disciplined advocate for his own development as an artist. My intentions were to assist him in making a small-scale model of a larger work hopefully to be commissioned in the future, in addition to learning and practicing skills of my own to take with me back home to use in my own practice, not to mention catching a glimpse of the Kathmandu art scene. While I only scratched the surface of the art scene, we were able to complete a the model, despite only working for three weeks (unfortunately due to the coincidental timing of the beginning of ISP and Tihar/Diwali, start on the project was delayed by a week and a half until November 19). Dipak and I first met over tea in Patan Durbar Square to iron out the details so that my application to work at the KU School of Arts would be approved, and what it was exactly that I wanted to do. I chose to work on a piece he already had in mind, as opposed to something only for myself. Dipak’s work is modern and precise, which I believed would be good practice for my own self-discipline, as my work back home is not at all precise or geometrically-driven. Given the nature of Dipak’s large-scale work, the piece has to stand sturdy requiring precise measurements and weighting, which, while difficult to do on a small scale, was a good exercise in self-discipline and precision for me. Once my application was approved, we met again at the market in Patan to buy materials and started work at the university.
In the three weeks following our first meeting and after buying materials (apron, gloves, safety glasses etc.) near Patan Durbar Square together, Dipak and I met at Kathmandu University School of Arts most days to work on a small-scale model of an art piece he is hoping to get commissioned in full-scale as a public artwork.

Scale of Dipak’s other commissioned work.

That first week, Dipak instructed me to make two basic forms, a cube and a rectangle of specified measurements, for practice and to get an idea of my skill level with the material. That was how most students at Kathmandu University started off in their first year, making basic shapes. Afterward students learn to imitate other artists, before finally developing their own style. This way of learning to create is dramatically different from my home institution, where generally one’s own style takes precedence, and aside from specific introductory classes such as Basic Drawing, learning to copy, or rather, follow in the style of another artist so closely, is not often part of the curriculum. Despite the differences in educational style, I found that the imitation-style of learning was a practice in discipline and precision, something I have struggled with in my own practice and would probably benefit from.

Basic form shapes painted matte black (left). Kathmandu University School of Arts (right).

After making the basic forms, we started on the model of the work that Dipak was hoping to get commissioned. He had already mostly decided on the form, and had made a paper model.
First paper model of the work (same model, different positions).

Because Dipak had not yet fully opened his own studio in Jawalakhel, we created a makeshift workspace at the university on a concrete platform outside the regular classrooms.

Workspace.

Dipak started with paper, sketching the whole form first before even moving into 3-D with a paper model, then each shape to scale again in paper, then finally on to iron. This work was to be composed of separate triangles, and he had already completed one of the metal pieces.

First, we would decide the measurements of each piece based on geometry, make it out of paper, then trace the paper outline onto an iron sheet then to the be cut. In a sense, each piece to be attached was made sort of like a paper doll; once the outline of the unfolded paper triangle was cut out of iron, we would then cut halfway through the sheet so that it could be bent and folded into place.
Dipak perfecting the edges of the cut-out shape before folding and welding.

Once all of the parts of a piece were folded together, then we would weld the remaining edges together. Following the welding, we would use an angle grinder to sharpen the edges, usually laying down several welds to build up the edge enough so that it could be smoothed into a straight edge without any dips or imperfections. The welds leave a layer of slag on top, meaning a layer of carbon that has to be chipped away before putting down another weld, otherwise it will have holes, or in effect, not stick. The process is time consuming, especially when working with thinner metal as we were. If the metal sheet gets too hot while welding, you can easily burn a hole which then has to be patched.

Welding a side together after folding (left). Dipak putting the finishing touches on an edge with the angle grinder (right).

We worked like this almost every day for almost three weeks (November 19-December 07). With each addition of a new component, much of the larger piece would be need to be redone. After making then perfecting the new separate part, we would then weld it to the rest of the piece, creating new welds and imperfections that had to be smoothed away all over again. Each individual piece had to be nearly seamless before attaching, then in attaching said piece, the
whole would need to be smoothed down once more, checking the angles, edges, and faces all again.

The first two pieces welded together.

Each day was punctuated with anyone and everyone coming by to see how things were going, and what we were doing. Back in at home, working in the studio for me is often a very solitary task, and people generally don’t drop by unannounced or interrupt work to ask questions, but while at KU at least a few times daily some of Dipak’s friends, or the school guards, professors, and cleaners would come by to see what we were doing. They would usually pick up one of the basic-form shapes I’d made earlier that was sitting around, chat, then sometimes we’d go get tea in the university canteen or at a café nearby.

Dipak and friends.

During the second week we took a break for a few days to work on the TV set for “It’s My Show” a Nepali variety show, (described to me as ‘Nepali Jimmy Kimmel’) that Dipak had been contracted to design.
I was and am still amazed at how inclusive and collaborative the art scene especially amongst KU students turned out to be. After working on the “IT’S MY SHOW” set one night, I accompanied Dipak, Manoj, and Suraj to a micro-gallery gathering showcasing the work of many students in addition to live performances.

At this event, like each other event I attended, there were familiar faces to support their friends’ or classmates’ work, and unlike many art events I’ve attended back home, no one pretended not to know one another. It was a communal gathering without the same pretense I had experienced as an art student before, although my experience was likely shaped by my outsider status, and I’m sure there were things that I was unaware of going on all around.
Invitation to open studio.


Invitation to Shared Skies exhibition of Sunita Maharjan’s work curated by Sharareh Bajracharya (left). Me and Dipak at the opening night of the exhibition (right).
Despite having spent the better part of three weeks working together, it wasn’t until the end that I was finally able to hear, at least a small portion of Dipak’s story, and come to understand his work in a more meaningful way, which is why I have left this section about Dipak’s history and evolution as an artist until the end. This way, this project reads in a way similar to how I experienced all of this.

In the beginning I assumed that working with metal given its history was considered low caste and would be of note throughout this project. Frankly in the end, it wasn’t. Dipak grew up in a village near Nijgadh, a city to the south of Kathmandu. His parents were not artists, his father a social worker and mother a housewife. As a child Dipak always loved to draw, but did not know art school was existed and first went to school to study education in Nijgadh, where he then worked in fabrication but always wanted to make his own pieces instead of just copying. Following a personal tragedy, he stopped work during which time his friends encouraged him to come to Kathmandu to begin again. Originally, Dipak worked as an illustrator for a T-shirt design company, where he was instructed to take hobby art classes to develop his skills. The self-exploration that came with the hobby classes was reinvigorating, and was able to connect his past and present through the medium of metal. By that point in time, he had worked with metal for 12-14 years, knew its nature well, and how to play with it.

At that point he joined Kathmandu University School of Arts, and started as all first-year students do, and as I did at the beginning of my apprenticeship with him, learning to make basic forms and shapes. Being the only sculptor in his batch (i.e. graduating class) he drew inspiration from Richard Serra, Henry Moore, and Alexander Calder, with the intention of creating a sculpture in monumental form and creating a visual impact with another layer of history. During his third year he copied Henry Moore’s style of sculpting, focusing on father-son realtionships, drawing inspiration from his own son. “In my art work, I want to show the bonding between father and son. Every son is inspiration for father and vice-versa. The emotions and moods in relationship between father and son; love, care, sadness, trust, faith, energy, distance come spiritually that portrays through the shape, form and space.”
This year, his fourth and final year at university, he started doing more modern work in developing his own style for his senior exhibition thesis. With the intention to play with form and space, Dipak decided to go back to basics and start again with basic shapes and forms as he did when he was a first-year student. For the work that he is doing now, and the work that I assisted with, he works in triangles because of their mutability, variability, and versatile quality. For example, if you make one side of a cube larger than the rest, it is no longer a cube, but that is not the case with triangles. They can take on many shapes and sizes while maintaining the integrity of their shape.

Despite several years of formal training in a variety of mediums, Dipak could not find attachment with any other materials besides metal. Metal feels comfortable, it is where he started, and aside from his advanced technical skills, it provides a link from his past to his present. Now he prefers to not make works with a single meaning or make something that is indicative of an already made form; his work is meant to be many things and not limited, much like himself. Aesthetically Dipak tries to create shapes and forms that have not been made before, but is still trying to find the value of aesthetic form and push how much he can do with it. As he puts it, he is still hungry, and not yet satisfied with his style or playing with form, and progression of his style and artistic development are the main goals.
On the last day after finishing the metal form, I polished the sculpture with the grinder then we treated it with a 2:1 mixture of bleach and vinegar to create a layer of rust. We had earlier that day spray-painted the cube and rectangle basic shapes from the beginning. He explained that metal even though it isn’t alive, has its own nature, which is why he doesn’t paint his works. He pointed out now that we had painted the shapes, they didn’t really look like metal anymore and he was right, they didn’t. Iron was meant to rust, and had its own color; putting an acrylic paint, plastic, or enamel over the top was hiding the true nature of the material. So instead after all of the work buffing and smoothing the sculpture time and time again, we treated it so that it would fully develop itself.

**Conclusion**

Even though Dipak’s work isn’t necessarily following the Newari metal tradition I had originally wanted to study (in fact Dipak is Tamang, and his mother tongue shares the Tibetan alphabet, even though the pronunciation is entirely different, much like the Ladakhi language), Dipak had his own personal and artistic tradition that he was developing. His focus was on the act of development of that tradition itself as opposed to the resultant artistic style that would come from it. His own personal history is steeped in the modern style work is trying, and it is his
relationship metal that connects the two together demonstrating and accentuating the other’s nature.
Bibliography
Interviews, conversations, outings etc. with Dipak Lama, November 07 2018- December 07 2018
Appendices
Dipak and mentioned friends’ BFA Exhibition Projects:

Compensation
I paid for materials in addition to compensating Dipak with a “mentorship fee.”
Suggestions for Future Research
According to all those I encountered, the Kathmandu art scene is very active and growing quickly. Based on other artists that I met at KU, art exhibitions attended, and friends of Dipak, I would expect that finding a similar apprenticeship in any type of medium would be possible. While working with metal for Dipak and by extension me was not associated with any kind of tradition, I would be very interested in an ISP that works with an artist whose work deals specifically with traditional materials and methods such as wood or stone carving as seen at the arTree Exhibition: “Opposite Dreams-The Politics of the Local.” Additionally, after working at the KU campus and meeting so many people associated with art there I think it would be interesting to interview the guards and the cleaning workers there, many of whom have worked for the university for nearly 20 years but are not (according to Dipak) formally educated in the arts, and see how the school/students has changed (if at all) and their attitudes toward the art being made on the campus.

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