

The Relentless Critic

Nepalese artist Ragini Upadhyay Grela has never been afraid to ask questions through her art, which has revitalized the satirical tradition of social commentary in the art of Nepal. She is exceptional in identifying contemporary ills be they of the environment or socio-political issues.

By Kurchi Dasgupta

Nepal's art world is dominated by men. Hindu and Buddhist religious paintings, for example, such as the Newar *paubha* and the Tibetan *thangka* are traditionally made by men. Western-influenced academic and modernist traditions as well as contemporary art have been so dominated by a male vision that the emergence of distinct female voices in art—such as that of Ragini Upadhyay Grela—introduced a new world-view and visual language. Art historians have summarized the phenomenon “as the profession of painting was traditionally a man's world, contemporary art produced by Nepali women speaks forcefully of a shift towards a perception of a world often centring around their gendered identities: of self, body politics, gender and sexuality.”¹

Ragini Upadhyay Grela, who was born in 1961, is one of the most important female artists in Nepal. And with nearly 60 solo exhibitions in Asia and Europe she is perhaps the most prolific woman artist of her generation. She moves as well with ease between printmaking and painting. Grela graduated from Lucknow's Arts and Crafts College in 1982, in painting. Subsequently she honed her skills as a printmaker in New Delhi, Scotland, England, and Germany between 1983 and 1990.

Grela's *oeuvre* may be seen as an important trajectory in Nepali art during the past three decades. *Desire*, from early 1980s, shows her exploring and questioning notions of gender and sexuality. This nuanced work brings together attacking wolves and feminine body-parts. The work cries out against the violence perpetrated against women, irrespective of cultures. It also charts a conscious moving away from a mere expression of

eyes, including the third eye of wisdom, remain recognizable. Here, *Kumari* (1984) exudes an ambiguity and a sadness that must have shocked conservative Nepali society. The series is a strong comment on the joys of life that the girl has to forego at an unthinkable young age—and remain a prisoner to endless customs and rituals—to ‘protect’ the township over which she reigns. The *Kumari* seems to have engaged most Nepali artists at

some point in their careers: perhaps thanks to her undisputed role as moral and material protectress. Few, however, have taken the bold step of breaking up her revered face, to suggest the emotions inside.

The sense of raucous laughter is a key element in Grela's work as she questions the absurdity of reality. Satire mingles with the religious-mythological to destroy the accepted norms and values of a viewer's complacent self. Grela's works are sharply critical. They have a democratizing effect that moves away

from the modernist tradition of glorified artmaking. By treating Hindu gods and goddesses with the irreverence that she would an erring politician, Grela's brilliantly colored and sharply outlined compositions are fresh. She attacks the pictorial space from all angles, though her planes are stable. To entice the viewer into the work Grela is decidedly post-modern in her desire to replace familiar



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *Divided Nepal* (Gaijatra series), 2009, acrylic on canvas, dimension variable. All images: Courtesy of the Artist.

beauty or emotion. One sees this in her 1985 work entitled *Face*.

Her acrylic-on-canvas series on *Kumari*, also in the 1980s, centers on the living goddesses of Nepal. Here she breaks with tradition by shying away from the representational to depict the pre-pubescent, virgin embodiment of the Hindu goddess Durga through expressionistic splashes of color. Only Durga's three

visual aesthetic norms with everyday edginess.

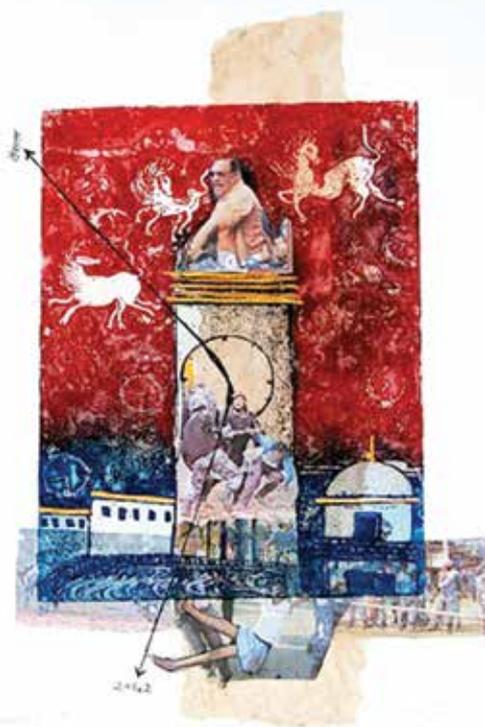
The *Time Wheel* series, which was unveiled at the Siddhartha Art Gallery in 2005, came at a crucial time in Nepal's journey towards a functioning democracy. The inevitability of change is what drives *Time Wheel*. Oppressed by royal controls, curfews, and insurgency, Nepalese society was fast reaching its breaking point. Familiar monuments, historical icons, royal faces, and political leaders litter Grela's canvas: here time watches over everything and everyone. By excluding the ordinary person, Grela heightens the tension between the quotidian and the one-sidedness of all historical narratives. As Dr. Sanjeev Uprety pointed out in a review, "common people did not have a vision or a voice of their own. They were gazed at perpetually from the divine eyes of grand timeless monuments without having a power of their own to gaze or look back. Their stories remained unwritten as the wheel of time turned around the spokes representing the faces of the great rulers and leaders of the nation." The series heralded a warning for the then political head of the Nepali state, the King.

Politics is not usually a subject for Nepal's women artists. Grela has, however, taken up a confrontational position *vis-à-vis* the country's political turbulence and burning social issues. While her contemporaries have mostly tiptoed around these, she has come out loud and clear with scathing comment. The etching entitled *Love and Politics* (1993) points to the insidious links of power, desire, and ego that can easily be a comment on sexual harassment.

On a different note, her popu-



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *Kumari*, 1989, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 84 cm.



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *For Democracy*, 2006, etching and mixed media, dimension variable.



Above left: Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *Desire*, 1979, etching, dimension variable.

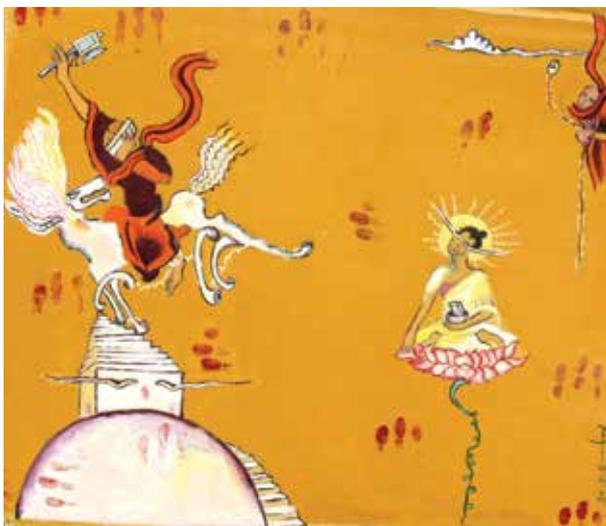


Above right: Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *Love and Politics II*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, dimension variable.

lar series and one of her own favorites, *Love in the Air*, comes as an atypical and joyous interlude in her *oeuvre*, which she showed between 2008 and 2010 in Austria, Nepal, Sweden, and Pakistan. Using traditional, local canvas specially primed for traditional *paubha* paintings, Grela reinvented the *paubha* tradition through her unique vision. *East Meets West* (2008), for example, shows the deities Chakrasambara and Vajrayogini reconfigured in a divine embrace, in which they unite atop a computer screen and between the two of them they share communication and technological devices. According to Grela, "new technologies have taken over our lives to such an extent that even love and union seem impossible without them—the very air surrounding us has become the medium of communication and so, *love in the air*."

Around the Stupa (2008) shows the Lord Buddha watching enthralled as communication technology infiltrates monasteries. With this series the artist seems bent on mining her emotional experiences and presenting them through myriad personifications and an array of global, touristy settings. And what is more enticing than Taj Mahal? Grela's raucous laughter simultaneously binds and rips apart the lovers Emperor Shahjahan—creator of Taj Mahal—and the symbol of eternal love, his deceased wife, Mumtaz Mahal.

With the very next series, *Gaijatra* (2010) Grela returned to serious political concerns that were tearing Nepal apart. The question of becoming a federal state came up and she was unequivocal in her response. *Divided Nepal* (2009) conveys it all—a cow, the symbol of the nation, is broken into multiple pieces and identities by golden lions (*aka* politicians),



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, **Around the Stupa**, 2008, acrylic on traditional canvas, 49" x 59" cm.

pulling at its limbs. The *kumari* peeps in and the *stupa*, a symbol of peace, lies in shambles. Her treatment of issues surrounding Nepali identity veers frightfully close to the cartoonish and runs the risk of being too 'momentous' to be of lasting value. Yet, the work rises to the level of iconic. Gaijatra is the Nepali equivalent of the Day of the Dead that celebrates the carnivalesque and used to be the one day when people were allowed to speak out on anything and everything during centuries of autocratic monarchical reign. Grela here mines the popular imagination for



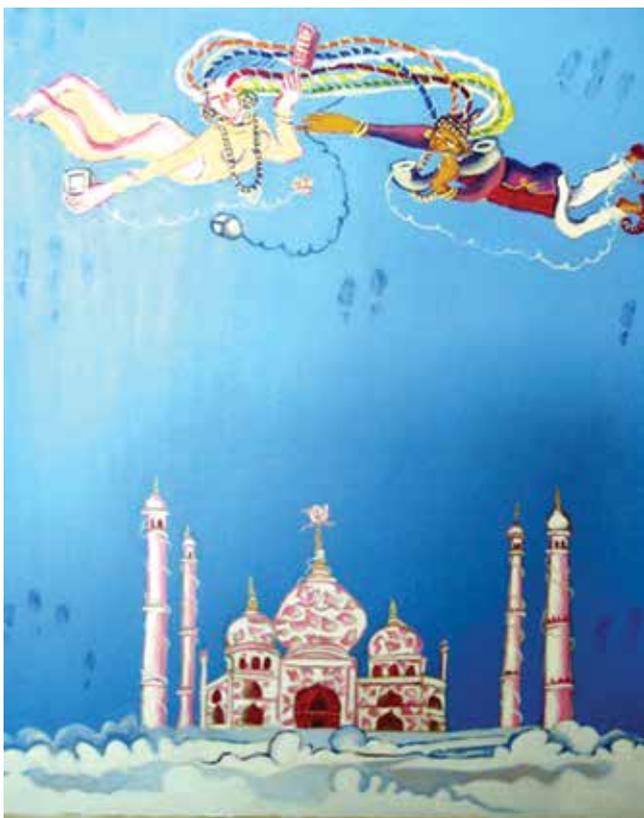
Ragini Upadhyay Grela, **Power's Rivalry on People's Back**, 2009, acrylic on canvas, dimension variable.

her symbols: the venerated *go-mata* (literally, cow the mother) becomes 'mother nation.'

In her re-imaginings, she has encountered obstacles, too. In the *Love in the Air* series there was a piece called *Saraswati* (2008) in which she projected herself as the Hindu goddess of learning and was immediately ordered by a fundamentalist group to take it off the gallery wall. Cultural historian Archana Thapa responded to the incident with: "her self-

incarnated divine image challenges the fixed knowledge centers and relocates knowledge centers in the keyboards of computers that anyone can have. On another level, maybe Ragini was *unlearning* the traditional cultic image of [the] goddess of knowledge and reimagining [the] goddess in every mortal human being, including herself."²

Interestingly, her paintings somehow retain the imprint of a printmaking consciousness, where sharp lines play a dominant role as opposed to painterly techniques. Colors, bright and contrast-



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, **Taj Mahal**, 2008, acrylic on traditional canvas, 49 x 59 cm.



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, **East Meets West**, 2008, acrylic on traditional canvas, 49 x 59 cm.

ing—reminiscent of a printmaker's palette—are her staple. Be it luscious yellows, greens, blues, and reds or sharp and simple black-and-white with a splash of red thrown in—her figures float in the pictorial space, highlighted by fluid black outlines. Though her vision has grown to incorporate more thought-provoking issues and a sharper, wittier take on things—her visual language seems to have held on to the anchor of sharply edged lines against a flat background—not dissimilar to that which she would probably have done with



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *Bagmati Today*, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 76 x 100 cm.

her etchings and lithographs. “I prefer painting to etching now, as each painting is different. But with etchings, I was working with prints that somehow were the same, though I did enhance them with collage and so on,” Grela says. “Line comes first for me. Each line is like a different wine with a different texture, bouquet, and aftertaste.”

Ragini Upadhyay Grela has already had solo and numerous group shows in her 35-year career. She is part of an artists' collective in Belgium, with whom she shows regularly along with Nepal's Seema Shah. Married to a Belgian national, she could easily have moved away from home. “Nepal is my subject, my home, my soul and I cannot work without being here often,” she says.

Persistent in her questioning of the social order from a location of gender, Grela has moved on to acute environmental concerns that integrate her involvement in socio-political issues. In a recent series, *Nature Speaks*, she takes on humankind's unforgivable sin, the rabid destruction of nature, its rivers, forests, and lands as well as the spiritual. “On behalf of nature, I convey its silent pain, its problems and injustices, as well as its rights as a living entity,” she says. Although her concern is global, she has located the series in urban Kathmandu and with an arsenal of familiar mythic symbols. The painting *Bagmati Today* depicts the Bagmati

river (personified in keeping with tradition) as a goddess wearing gloves trying to clean her own body. Rabelesian in connection to popular image banks, myths, and sentiments, coupled with an uncanny sense of the ludicrous that undercuts all grandiosity the artist reinvigorates mythic goddesses like Saraswati or the Tulsī in contemporary technological action, thereby reclaiming and reconfiguring their relevance. Her effort to make traditional myths and figures relevant brings to mind



Ragini Upadhyay Grela, *Untitled (Monet's Garden)*, 2013, watercolor on paper, dimension variable.

indigenous art forms that thrive on the walls of rural homes in Nepal's Terai region.

Grela's roots are in Terai. It is not difficult to visualize her unself-consciously, methodically laying out traditional mythic retellings on a mud wall in a faraway rural home. “When I was a student in primary school, a teacher once said that art should be created in service to life and not just for itself—and that has been driving me since,” says Grela. “If my work changes the way people think and behave even a little bit, I will feel that my art has been worthwhile.”

In 2013, Grela visited Claude Monet's Garden in Giverny. A series of untitled works was the response to that visit. The series is significant in that it records an artist's immediate response to another artist from a different era and culture while consciously addressing a different period in art history. Working with watercolors, she captures the essence of the garden's flora and fauna as well as its great creator, all rising in rebellion against the gloom of pollution. The inevitability of environmental disasters weighs on her shoulders: “My next series will probably be on animals from an animal rights angle,” says Ragini Upadhyay Grela.

It is lucky that we have Ragini Upadhyay Grela, alongside Manoj Babu Mishra, to revitalize the satirical tradition of social commentary in the art of Nepal as well as her relentless commitment to identifying and critiquing contemporary ills. Δ

Notes:

1. “Contemporary Nepali Art: Narratives of Modernity and Visuality” by Dina Bangdel in *Nepal Nostalgia and Modernity*, pub. The Marg Foundation, 2011.
2. “Encountering Techno”, Saraswati, Archana Thapa, *Kathmandu Post*, 2009.

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