

DALIT ART

SURAJ YENGDE

What is the purpose of art? This question has baffled artists as much as art admirers and critics. I believe the purpose of art cannot be defined in simplistic terms. Art has an objective: to serve human emotions and vulnerability. More importantly, however, is its role in guiding human sensibility. It is a rendezvous of unexplored or repressed emotions that we have carried all along. Giving these emotions a chance, art provokes moments of reckoning and candid dialogue to testify to the post-time phase. Art allows us to surrender, to submit to a higher feeling—that elated moment of understanding.

Art is a feeling that comes to you unfiltered. Submitting to the command of art is the effect of an artist captivating your imagination. Artists are multilingual, and their tradition is universal; art can disrupt and create ruptures in the quotidian.

By elevating the unknown and the unexplored to an increasingly rationalizing mind, art can humanize faculties that are condemned to hospitals and clinics. The gap between consciousness and the unconscious can be filled with the artist's belief of a hope beyond the present. Art is also that enthralling alley that can create a sense of ecstasy that we otherwise seek in narcotics. A portrait can arouse waves of emotions in suppressed bones and allow us to grieve or celebrate. A performance onstage or a musical note, a poem rescued from the long-forgotten dust of scribbled lines, or the springtime Impressionist touch of Monet all invite us to witness the multiple moods of life. Herein lies the power-praxis of art's ontology.

Art has the potential to take the axioms of fear and vulnerability of an individual to the public, where interpersonal choices become appreciable. Feelings of insecurity give

way to moments of solidarity, diminishing the burden of shame and evoking the lightness of the moment. Human relaxation is momentary; we yearn to prolong the memory of this moment. Some follow a life of remembering the moment of this relief, of achievement or passion. That is how an interpretation of a "safe haven" is drawn through the many facets of human imagination.

My inspiration lies in the art of the Buddhist world and Post-Impressionism. Both can capture time as a snapshot within a galactic history. These schools of thought have delivered sermons of truth. It is no accident that art has constructed realities that even the most advanced technès have barely managed to touch. Vincent van Gogh's most famous artwork, *The Starry Night* (1889), depicted a version of the cosmos when Europe was still grappling with Galileo's and Leonardo da Vinci's estimation of the outer world.

Buddhist art exemplifies humanity's highest point of achievement. Each craft—carefully chosen, worked on, and delivered—reflects the mighty legacy of the Buddha's ancestral endowment and his immense compassion passed on through generations praying for Metta, the concept of universal kindness. This loving-kindness of all is articulated through the channels of spiritualism aided by art.

Buddhist Past, Dalit Present

Dalit Art is a moment and a school of thought that embraces the ancestors whose lifeworlds and personal stories define our present existence. The bold statements of Dalit artists and the affirmation of their wretched position are not to be discredited as cheap gimmickry. Within the Dalit art world, there is hardly an occasion that does not speak to the appalling social or political circumstances their community is forced into. Dalit artists bring to the fore the genius of their talent and merge it, like two massive flowing rivers, into their art genres. For example, Vikant Bhise's specialization in contemporary art evokes the intuitive nature of the Impressionists in masterful strokes. However, his trenchant take on his people's unjust, inhumane social conditions is palpable.

Art is a lived politics for Dalit artists.

With the advancement in techniques of visual mobility and strides in motion pictures, a more human-centered appeal has developed over the past century. Sometimes this appeal is manipulative. At other times, it is sincere. If cinematic exposure does not inculcate a feeling of insult, love, and contempt, it has not achieved its purpose. Cinema has an audience committed

to its complete vision. Within its focused time frame, it has a captive viewership committed of its message. With multiple tools and shared art practices, it has an opportunity to communicate many possibilities.

Dalit cinema crafted by Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, Neeraj Ghaywan, Mari Selvaraj, and a host of other respected film-makers and producers from Dalit and oppressed communities has transformed the tag of caste into a badge of honor that pays respect to the artists' ancestors and contemporaries.

The enrichment of music, theater, painting, sculpture, rap, and dance as a Dalit art form is still in its twilight phase for the outside world. To illustrate the buried moral and ethical mandate in art, one needs to accept one's own culpability, and this becomes the defining feature of the art. To make sense of the emotional response attached to the artwork, one needs to deploy the philosophical necessity of aesthetics. By delving into the reason of art, we can open up to various meanings that address a host of human anxieties. Art is put to the test when it faces tyranny. Aesthetics allow emotions and belief to have meaning. This meaning can be generalized. Its value does not rely on the creator or the observer. The meaning here is a transliteration of the direct sensations experienced through mind and touch.

Here, I will focus on the creativity of modern expression manifested through the lyrical gospels of Dalit artists. It is about the expression, or cultivation, of the mother tongue in a rap song, its emphatic tone and raging enthusiasm simultaneously soothing the soul and agitating the mind. Dalit Art, in general, unites the mind by bringing together the sensibilities of anger and sorrow, and by speaking up without fear. This conversion into action demands accountability of life's worth. Waman Kardak, one of India's most profound Dalit poets, questioned the absence of anguish among the Dalit masses. Putting the burden of determining the cause of passivity back on himself, Kardak considers who he should blame for his evasive emotions.

The slaughterhouse and the Dalit home are next to each other. The burial ground and Dalit food coexist. The Dalit writers Sharankumar Limbale and Daya Pawar tell us about the inhumane conditions of rural and urban ghettos in which Dalits are forced to live. In the evening, when the father and mother come back from a hard day's work and put food made with salt and chilli powder on the table, the stench of the burning corpse in the cremation ground just outside the window wafts in. While consuming a hard-earned meal in the makeshift hut, the vulnerability of life condemned as the lowest of low doesn't leave the shadow of philosophical death.

One needs to go through the darkest chambers of fear, threat, and pain. Without sincere pain, it would be a challenge for art to penetrate people's hearts, and that connection would perhaps be fleeting and superficial.

Separation and pain are two steadfast foundations of art. The artist must separate from attachments to create a space for art. This separation can take many forms. But the artist must follow the route of pain not just as a felt emotion, but also as an ascriptive complexity containing a one-off metathesis. The route of pain is borne of a womb that was banished for generations, a forced exile—Dalit artists draw themselves out of this darkness, or makes darkness their theme to create new art.

Dalit art evolves into an organic osmosis of theory and praxis. However, for it to achieve a universal significance, it



Fig. 1 Prabhakar Kamble, *Broken Foot*, Wood, 6 x 6.5 inches (15.2 x 16.5 cm). 2020.

needs to bring the experiences of other oppressed peoples into its fold. The Harlem Renaissance, Cubism, and Negritude movements belong to a long tradition of foregrounding the humanity of the Black and Brown body. However, many Dalit artists who have been formally trained in schools, or by their elders, have taken the clouded and sunny terrain of these movements as an invaluable inheritance. Their mission is to make discomfort everyone's, rather than theirs alone.

Prabhakar Kamble (see Fig. 1) works in various media to make conventional norms uncomfortable. His portraits, sculptures, and performances depict the regular. Powdered pigments, pots, sculptures, bodies, and feet are his aesthetic collaborators. By presenting to us a broken foot, as he has

sculptured in his artworks, Kamble smashes the belief that this is natural by making it an issue of society. The foot cannot be elsewhere but at the bottom, giving balance to the rest of the body. But it is condemned as unholy and dirty. Kamble crushes the foot and smacks society on its face with the responsibility of standing tall.

Parallel Worlds in One Universe

The turmoil in the world has produced many reactions. This has allowed our true selves to be manipulated by external factors. Can unadulterated emotion be an act of performance? For, in the act of mimicry, one can truly expose one's true self. The search for the true self is impeded by the self-presentation demanded of us. We are constantly looking for the most accurate image, one that is unique to us. If something precious is accessible to all, its value compounds into the hybridity of experiences. Uniqueness counters the nature of exogamic art.

Dalit Art has a responsibility to correct the measures by other people that attack not just their own dignity, but that of other oppressed peoples. For, the enemy of Dalits is not theirs alone. The enemy's impulse to destroy the world is rooted in the nihilism of caste society. Thus, the artist needs to summon every tool possible to break the oppressor's chains of persecution.

Establishing a Standalone Shared Legacy

I have argued in *Caste Matters* (2019) that the contemporary era is an arrival of the Dalit Harlem moment. This proposition needs further clarification. The Dalit body and aesthetic are yet to be accepted as art by all. Yet Dalit artists have produced great art, be it performative, visual, or graphic. By exposing themselves to enormous risks and conducting bold experiments grounded in self-examination, Dalit artists also inform us about the practical exigencies in their daily lives. The life that is mediated by past traumas and resentments is constantly challenged by insecurities and creates an image of vulnerability and the capricious nature of love.

Dalit Art stands in opposition to the anti-Dalit, anti-humane forces. It is guarded against violence and oppression by its vision, which channels pain with a poetic touch, and from a fiery source.

Art as an outcome of boredom has a different value than art as a necessity. The Dalit artists who bring the energy of the past and the vulnerability of the present into the art they practice nourish the field of art. Artists from an oppressed



Fig. 2 Vikrant Bhise, *The Rise of Protests*. Acrylic on canvas. 13 x 11 inches (33 cm x 28 cm). 2021.



Fig. 3 Malvika Raj, *Sujata*. Acrylic on canvas, 30 x 20 inches (76.2 x 50.8 cm). 2013.

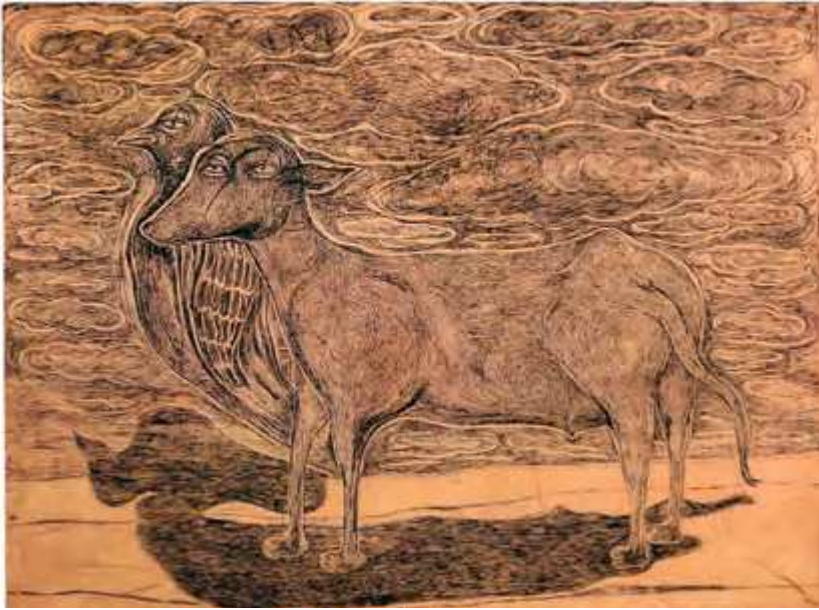


Fig. 4 Tejswani Narayan Sonawane, *Togetherness*, Etching on copper plate. 7 x 9 inches (17.8 x 22.8 cm). 2019.

community bring out the true nature of art as a protest culture and joyous experience. They do not believe in adulterations and cheap copies. By approaching art as a necessity, Dalit artists repatriate what was taken from them. The vastness of their imaginations are not easily diluted. One needs new tools of analysis and a refined language to gauge the possibilities of this limitless art against the sky of impossibilities.

Dalit Art is strong and soft. It relies on the audience to consider the conditions under which it was made, be it the symbolic gestures in Vikrant Bhise's paintings (see Fig. 2) or the calculated strokes of Malvika Raj's Madhubani art (see Fig. 3), which created waves by introducing a new subject to a centuries-old Hindu style of painting: scenes from the life of the Buddha. Tejswani Narayan Sonawane's Jataka-inspired works (see Fig. 4) represent Buddhist tales told through animals depicting a courageous sociopolitical movement against caste exploitation, while Rajyashri Goody's installation artwork (see Fig. 5) is a scathing commentary on untouchability. Manish Harijan's conceptual photo-performances explore notions of visibility and invisibility (see Fig. 6), while the embrace of the human and nonhuman ancestors in artist Sajan Mani's performance is an indictment of the caste system (see Fig. 7), and the donkey is a recurring theme in Ranjeeta Kumari's works

(see Fig. 8), with its history as a beast of burden. Like their Dalit compatriots, these artists put a permanent stamp of their uncompromising nature in the exclusionary space of caste culture. They produce strong statements through the radical and forceful languages of their art. Their ambition is not only to destabilize the pro-caste art sphere, but to create a space for Dalits to feel as though they belong. It is the quest to create a permanent home in the house of comforting wilderness that Dalit Art offers as a humanistic cover.

Pramod Ramteke is an Ambedkarite Buddhist from Nagpur who experimented with various art forms, ultimately validating his subjects and themes through philosophical theories on Dalit life. Ramteke received a retrospective titled *Open Mind* at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Mumbai in 2021, which include over 250 artworks. It was the first time that a Dalit artist was recognized in this way, and it took four years of lobbying and fending off aspersions. What does this veteran artist, who grew up in poverty but gained strength by internalizing Ambedkar's message of liberation and dignity, offer the general public? He provides the world with a unique opportunity to experience Dalit life.



Fig. 5 Rajyashri Goody, *What is the Caste of Water?*, 108 glass tumblers containing dried and diluted panchagavya (a mixture of cow dung, cow urine, milk, ghee, and curd), 2 plastic bottles with cow urine. 118 x 39.4 inches (300 x 100 cm). 2017.



Fig. 6 Manish Harijan, *Shaman (unseen Untouchable)*, C-print on aluminum, 38.7 x 56.8 inches (98.2 cm x 144.4 cm). UK Government Art Collection, Purchased from the artist March 2021, through the Art XUK project 2020-21. 2019.

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This work was created to highlight the issue of statelessness and the importance of human rights for each individual. Manish Harijan contributed this piece in accompaniment to his performance art at the Museum of Communication at The Hague.

Solidarities of Emotions

Solidarity between anti-oppression movements and Dalits expand the possibilities for global futures in which creativity proliferates at protest sites. These sites of solidarity have always wandered into the world of art. Literature, visual art, and music have created possibilities for Dalit freedom in the minds and rhythms of world culture, through the plurality of Bollywood and classical Indian forms. To sit under a tree on a hot day, worn out by days of hard labor, and become mesmerized by a song that invites the soul to rejoice—this is absolutely necessary. The Dalit voice, crackling with pain and lament, invites everyone to participate in the grief and contribute their tears as alms.

Dalit musical performers are original and unfiltered. Their music will affect you only if you're willing to submit to the unseen. The spirit of Ambedkar is called by the performer. Ambedkar's energy and guidance works its way through the performer and the audience. Ambedkar comes to you, sits with you, and leaves you with a heightened feeling of relaxation. He inspires you to wrap up your rug and go home to think about the kind of world you want to give your children.

Late at night, while staring at the tin roof and darkened wood that supports the house's structure, you imagine an impossibility—what to do with your life? The answer comes as enlightenment: prepare the next generation. They must be like Ambedkar. They need to carry his work forward. *The children need to dress like him, speak and write like him. I need an Ambedkar in my house.* Revolution is born in parents that night who vow to educate their children until they become Ambedkar. The spirit of Ambedkar never dies in the performance. In moments of sadness, Ambedkar appears like a force and works much like he did at the performance many nights ago.

Harsh measures of justice need a sharp vision with a focal point. Dalit Art is a timely theme to address this. The artists' might comes from an enduring preoccupation with their subject, and from its need to be expressed, shared, and communicated in unison among the artist, viewer, and critic. Art is a spiritual experience for Dalits, through which they convey love to the Supreme and consciously care for the vulnerable. The purity of inner feeling is expressed through the compassionate embrace of new innovations formed within the sublime imagination of the artist. Dalit Art reflects the Buddhist tenet of recognizing the self as changing materiality. The political and sensual join to revive the human spirit.

The floating surface of water adapts to nature's ever-changing forms and colors. It allows for nature to reveal itself comfortably,

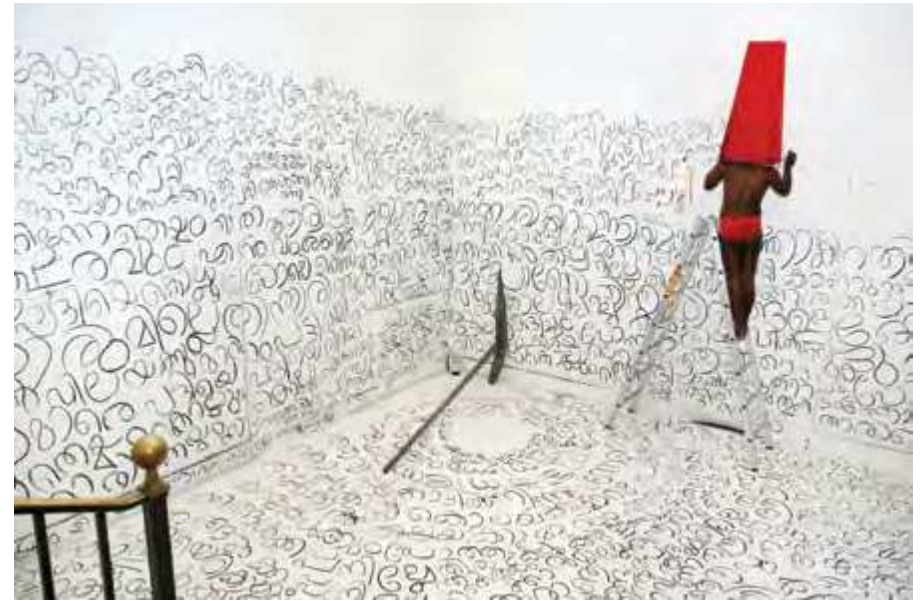


Fig. 7 Sajan Mani, *Caste-pital*, performance still. From the Specters of Communism: A Festival on the Revolutionary Century, conceptualized by Okwui Enwezor, curated by Raqs Media Collective. Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany. 2017.



Fig. 8 Ranjeeta Kumari, *Beast of Burden*, Donkey series, Watercolor on paper. 9 x 12 inches (22.8 x 30.5 cm). 2020.

without prejudice, and identify itself clearly. It is the first glimpse of a deeper story that is unexplored. Dalit Art is a door to that surface of nature that can be understood through the minds and bodies of the Dalit touch. A critical assessment of the world that has not yet developed a grammar to accommodate the viewpoint of the vulnerable margins, Dalit Art is evidence of that testimony. Dalit Art is a refuge of the undesired and the unspeakable. Thus, like the temporarily unchanging surface of the water, Dalit Art is a space for the indeterminate willing to take the risk to determine its position. The constituency of the banished is preparing to establish its kingdom. Dalit Art is an ancillary guide to a present and future council of thinkers and practitioners.

TOUCH