

India-Bhutan Cultural Exchange and Art Camp

14 to 18 June 2016

CENTRE FOR
ESCALATION
OF PEACE

CEP

To learn and celebrate the rich heritage of Indian and Bhutanese art and culture, a group of 10 distinguished artists – five from each country – came together for an Art Camp in Thimphu from 14 to 18 June to interact and collaborate on creating great works of art.

The Art Camp was part of an India-Bhutan cultural exchange programme jointly organised by the Centre for Escalation of Peace, New Delhi; the Royal Office for Media, Thimphu; the Voluntary Artists' Studio, Thimphu; and the India-Bhutan Foundation, Thimphu.

The cultural exchange programme is split in two components; the first half of the programme took place in Bhutan; while the second half of the programme will take place in India, comprising the same 10 artists. The five artists from Bhutan were: Kama Wangdi, Pema Tshering, Sukbir Bishwa, Rajesh Gurung, and Karma Wangchuk; while the five artists from India were: GR Iranna, Rajendra Tiku, Jagannath Panda, Kishor Shinde, and Manjunath Kamath.

Objectives:

- The India-Bhutan Cultural Exchange and Art Camp is a programme that aims to build cultural awareness and positive cultural relations between the two countries by providing a common platform for artists to come together, interact, get inspired and thus expand the scope of their own art form.
- The exchange of ideas during artistic collaboration will not only stimulate the creative environment but will also help in maintaining a continuous and harmonious interaction required between the two countries, thus strengthening the existing, uniquely close and mutually beneficial relationship.

Rationale/Context

Bilateral relations between India and Bhutan have been traditionally close; we enjoy a warm, cordial and mutually beneficial relationship. Our cultural lineage makes us natural friends and partners. India and Bhutan have a symbiotic relationship, both learning and mutually growing from it, whether in economic, political or cultural relations.

At the CEP, one of our primary aims remains the strengthening of cultural relations and activities while respecting and celebrating differences among the two countries through the medium of art.



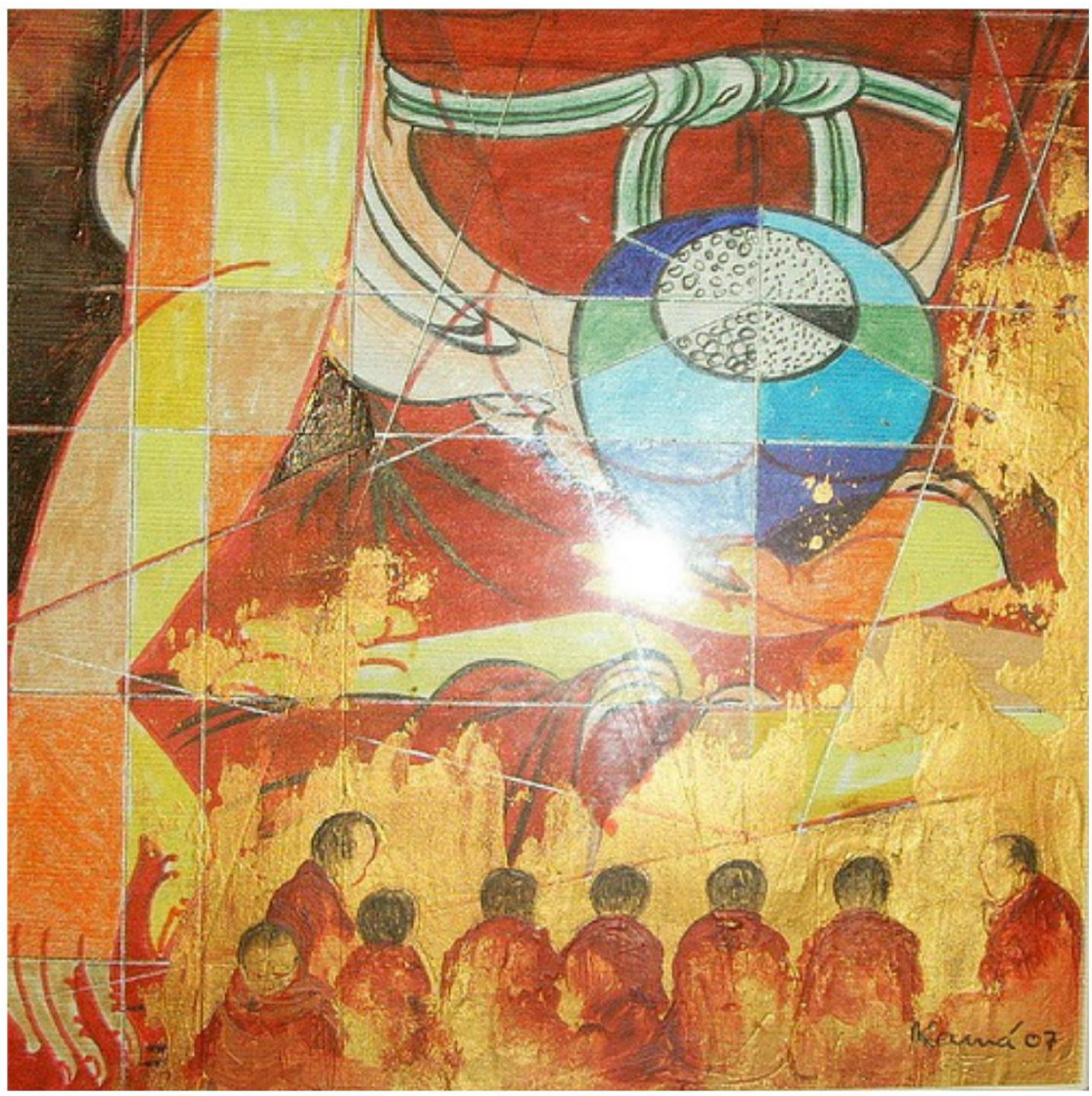
14 June, Thimphu:

The 10 participating artists from both countries and budding young artists from Bhutan gathered for an informal session at the VAST studio. The day commenced with a round of introductions as well as an overview of the programme and its objectives.



Kama Wangdi took the audience through a fascinating account of the state of art in Bhutan. Artists in Bhutan are a small community and deeply rooted in traditional art. Currently, there is no structured artistic movement and the focus on traditional art remains a priority, although experimentation with modern art has also begun in pockets. Traditional art, while immensely rich and complex, is governed by strict and precise guidelines.

Religious iconography and its interpretation also come with their own set of complex responsibilities. Is the artist expected to depict the sacred only in its truest form or does she/he allow some room for experimentation? This also brings in the question of whether the viewing public will appreciate these artistic liberties. Given the nature of this delicate and yet promising environment, it has now become crucial to create a new artistic movement in Bhutan which fuses elements of different art forms. A rejuvenated movement -without watertight categories of what is traditional or contemporary art- can be made possible only through ample opportunities for further study, interactions, and observations.



Bhutanese art today reflects the changes the country has undergone. Many more artists are finding new ways to express themselves. In the capital alone, within the last 10 years, the number of art galleries has increased from one to five. "People make assumptions that contemporary art is modern art, but it is not. Traditional art can also be contemporary art" - Kama Wangdi

The VAST studio and art gallery housed within the Tarayana Centre has over the years become the capital's main centre for local artists. The goal of the studio is to promote both traditional and contemporary works of Bhutanese art, to provide vocational training for young artists and to act as a creative meeting venue for artists. The centre has now been entrusted with the immense responsibility to spearhead art in the community and in educational institutions. Mention was also made of existing scholarships with Sri Lanka, Pakistan, ICCR, and Bangladesh for the next generation of Bhutan artists. The shared dream for artists in Bhutan is the opening of an Art institute and perhaps go one step further by attempting to influence the government into introducing student scholarships to study art.

Through the course of the discussion, a number of inputs and suggestions came forward on the creation of an artistic movement. Bhutan is a country where art is reflected everywhere. Besides the creation of masterpieces, it also becomes the artists' duty to educate the public and the government about art. An art gallery at a national level would be wonderful for the country, as well as the introduction of an Artist in Residence Programme.

Discussions around the wealth generation in art need to also be initiated at some point. It should not be perceived only as a leisure activity. While there exists a world of possibility for the artistic environment in the country, these steps should be carried forward within Bhutan's own pace and time.

The discussions were followed by a visit to the Memorial Chorten and a tour of veteran artist Sukbir Bishwa's art gallery in Thimphu.



15 June, Paro

The artists had the great fortune to witness the celebrations marking the 400th Birth Anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava at the Paro Dzong and the lighting of a thousand butter lamps before the Guru Throngdrel. The unfurling of the magnificent Throngdrel was followed by mask dances, songs, and Guru Dragmar offering feast.

The celebrations were the ideal setting to observe the rich artistic and cultural traditions in Bhutan—particularly for the Indian artists—with the Paro Dzong providing the finest backdrop and testament to the distinctive type of fortress architecture found in Bhutan. The immersion in these cultural experiences was transformative and a visual delight.



Trek to Tiger's Nest

The celebrations at the Paro Dzong were followed by a trek to Taktsang Monastery or Tiger's Nest - a first for all the artists from India.



16 June, Thimphu and Punakha

Day 3 of the Artist Exchange saw Indian artists present their body of work at the VAST studio. The presentations showcased recurring themes in their work and their journey as artists over the years.



Rajendra Tiku: Some of the elements that characterise Mr Rajendra Tiku's work are: metaphorical representations of life in Kashmir, addition of the sacred into sculptures, placement of thread over ordinary objects, theme of talisman and relic on sandstone and wood, calligraphic graffiti, and monumental stone sculptures.



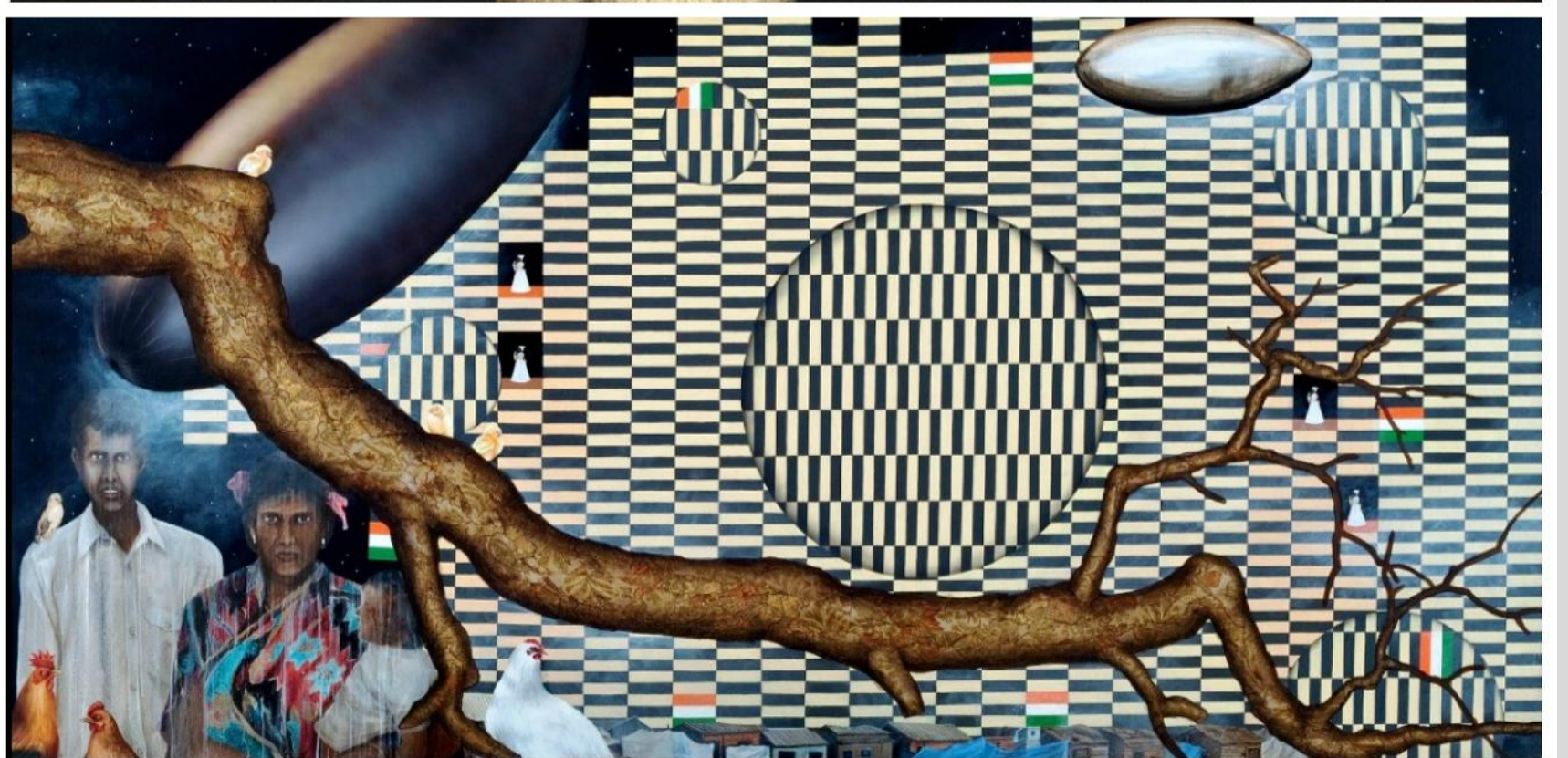
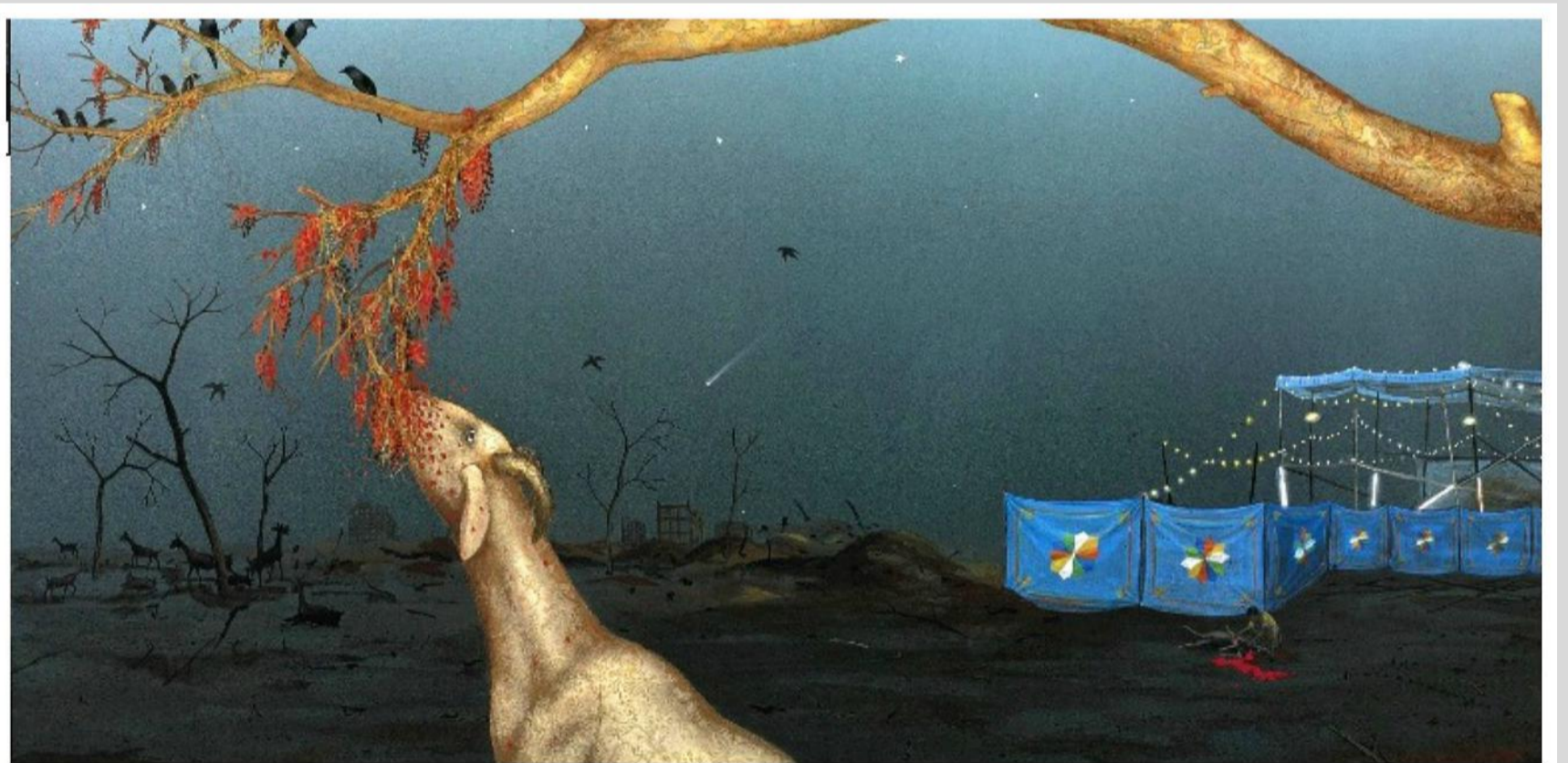
Kishor Shinde: Mr Kishor Shinde is one of the most profound Abstract artists and Expressionists of his age. The combination of colour palettes and visual perspective immediately stand out in his work.



Manjunath Kamath: Mr Kamath's work has influences of miniature Indian paintings, Thangka, and Persian art. His intricate terracotta sculptures comprise different pieces which are fused together to change the history and context of the sculpture.



G R Iranna: Mr Iranna's art is a reflection of his inner journey of growth, struggle, and transformation. There is an element of pain which is unmistakable in his works.



Jagannath Panda: Mr Panda's work combines imagery and mythological depiction of everyday urban life. Fabric is a very strong element in his works, as well as the translation of one material into another.

Participants travelled to Punakha in the second half of the day where they were hosted by Kama Wangdi in his beautiful home. The stay offered a wonderful first-hand experience of living in a traditional Bhutanese house and getting to know the family through conversation and over home-cooked meals.



Artists were able to bond further and continue discussions, while enjoying solace and taking inspiration from the pristine and lush beauty of rural Bhutan. Through walks and exploration around the village and forest, it became evident how concepts of aesthetics and beauty in Bhutan are incredibly strong, since they have roots at home and interspersed effortlessly into everyday life.



17 June, Punakha

On the fourth day, young artists from VAST were given an art assignment by senior artists in which they were asked to paint an object with a focus on all its details. They were encouraged to keep the attention on the foreground instead of the background. The assignment was especially chosen to enable the artists to come out of their comfort zones and shift from landscape, a recurring theme in most of their artwork so far.



Young artists from VAST and some of their artwork





The young artists displayed their artwork and discussed the idea of *Perspective* in great detail with their mentors.



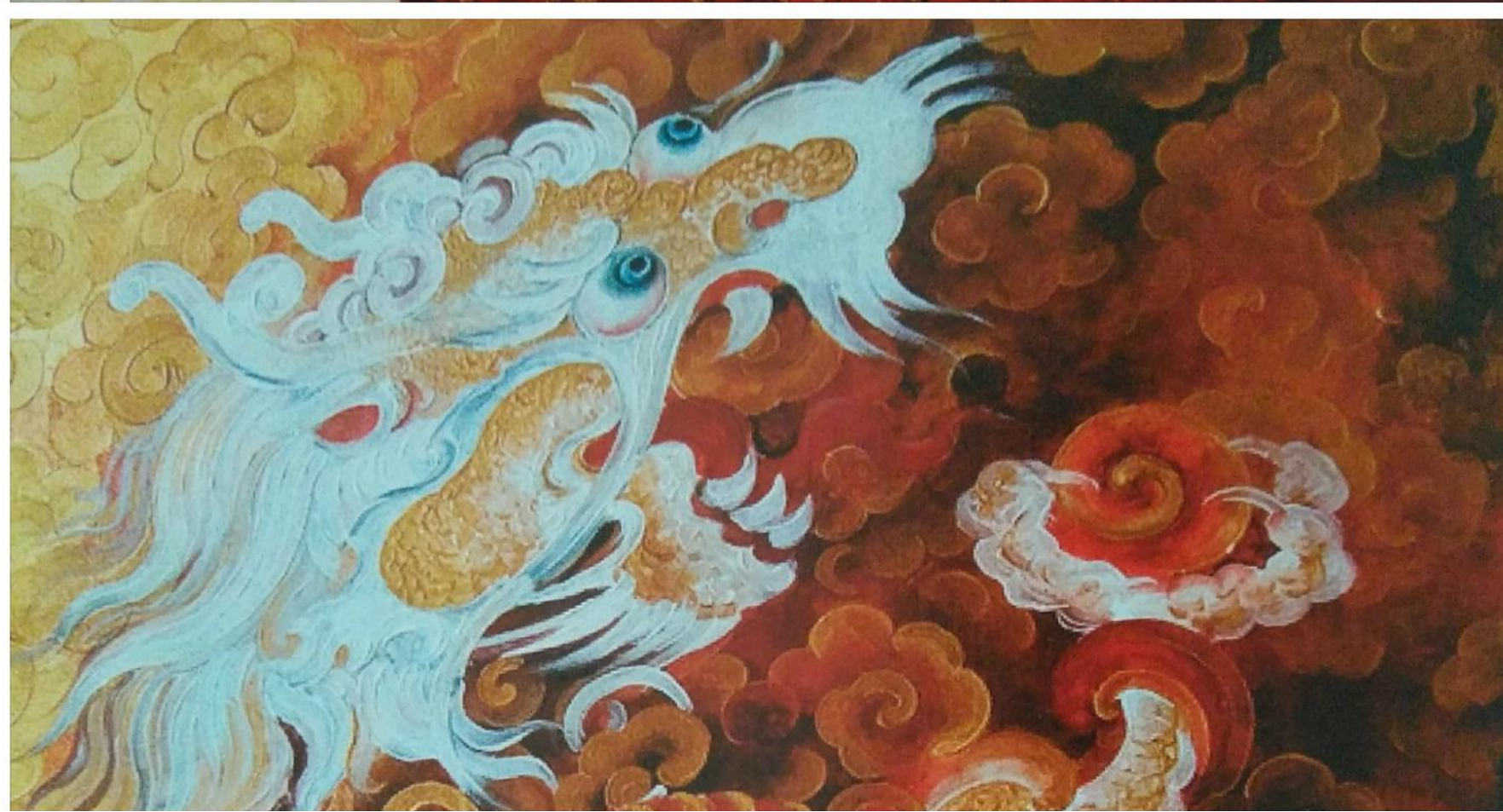
Following this engaging art exercise, participants visited the magnificent Punakha Dzong and explored tales of the Divine Madman at Chimi Lhakhang.



18 June, Thimphu

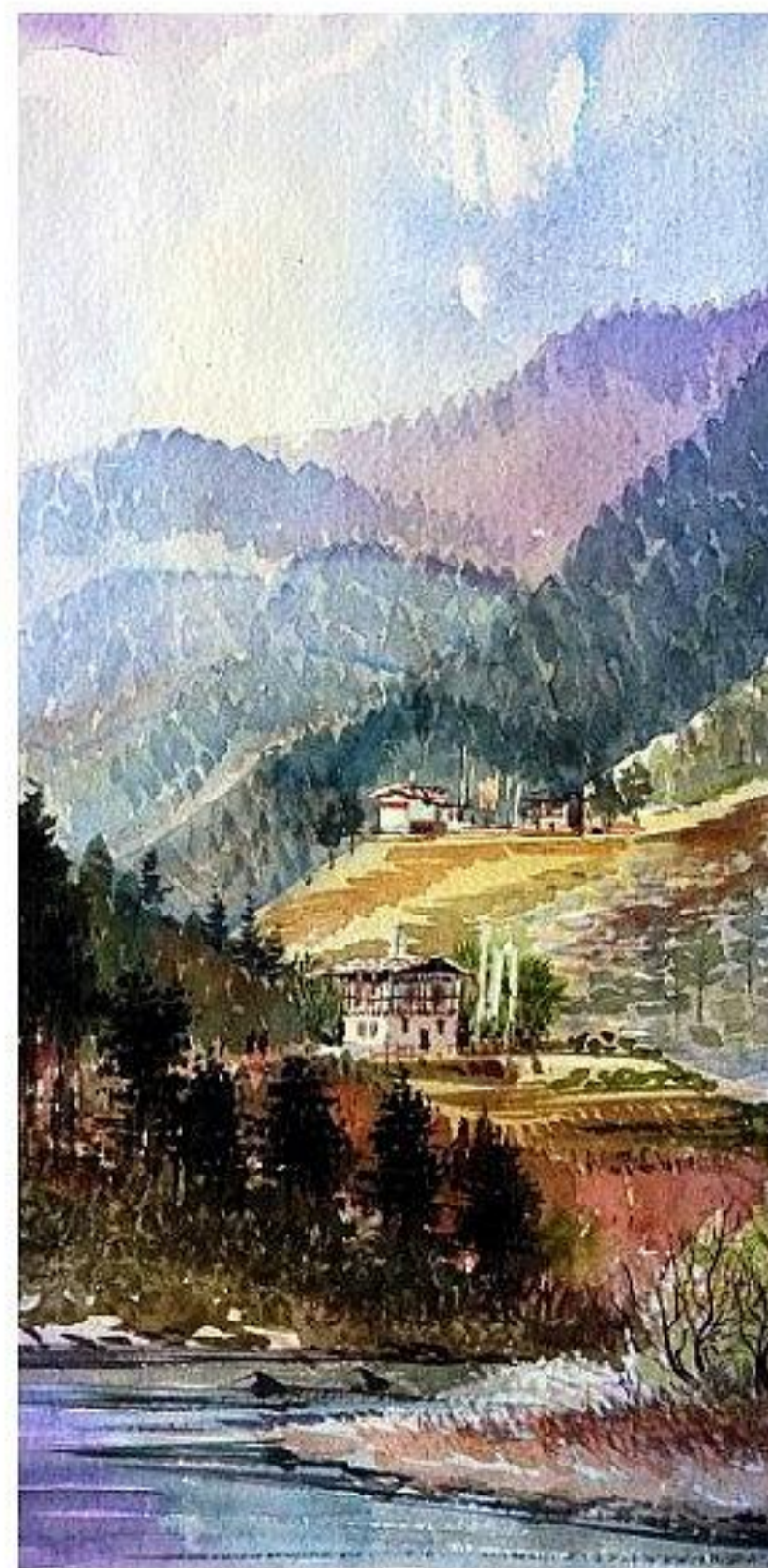
On the final day, artists from Bhutan presented their work and shared narratives on how they arrived at their respective artistic choices.

Kama Wangdi: Mr. Wangdi's artwork reflects his journey as a painter and the complexities of traditional art.

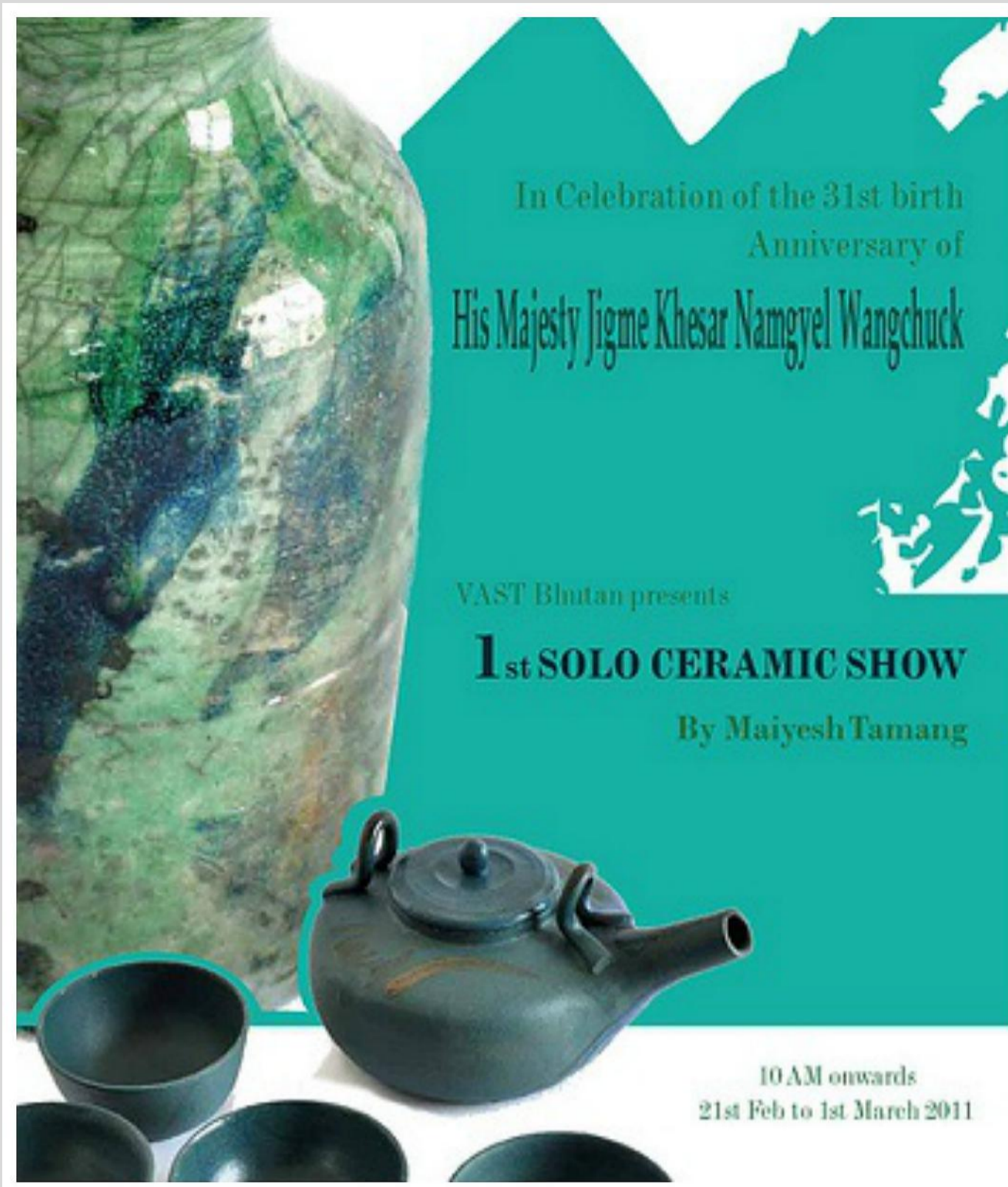




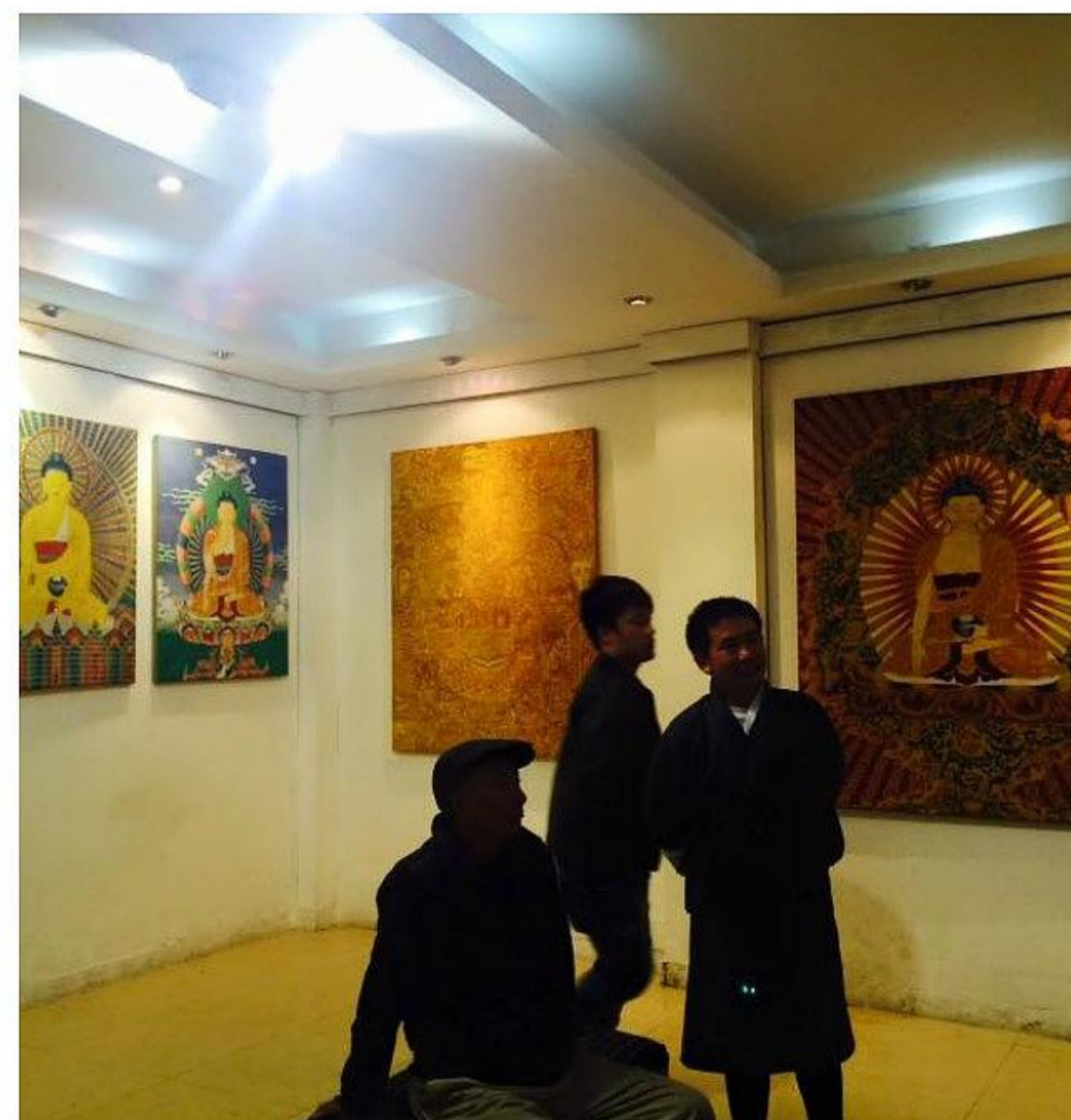
Rajesh Gurung: Mr. Rajesh Gurung experiments a great deal with different art forms and metaphors, as well as deconstructing them in the process.



Sukbir Bishwa: Mr Sukbir Bishwa's inspiration for his art comes from nature and architecture. His art has developed over the years through observation, readings, criticisms, and self-teaching.



Maiyesh Tamang: Mr Maiyesh Tamang's art focuses on Ceramics. His mission is to revive traditional pottery in Bhutan.



Gyempo Wangchuk: Mr Gyempo Wangchuk paints traditional murals with contemporary ideas.

Interaction with the Media

As a culmination to the five-day Artist Exchange, an informal interaction was organised at the VAST Studio in Thimphu on Saturday 18 June, which was attended by the media, artists, students, intellectuals, filmmakers, writers, and other members of civil society. The discussion served as a platform for free discussion and debate on the role of art and the artist in society, with special reference to the artistic climate in Bhutan. Artists from Bhutan shared their personal journeys in the profession; an articulation of the triumphs and struggles of being an artist in Bhutan which has shaped their creative voice and choices.

Views were exchanged on the veritable artistic dilemma: does one create art for oneself or for the audience? In a bid to preserve the country's heritage and culture, it was felt that artists—particularly in Bhutan— seem to be caught in a limbo. This small and often misunderstood community work within strict guidelines laid down for religious art and a creative movement which is growing steadily but is still in its earliest stages. Currently, they also seem to exist in a space where the focus is on balancing their artistic expressions with earning a living.



Through the course of a stimulating discussion, the importance of using different mediums to preserve culture was emphasised, as well as having the courage to find a creative voice. The role of the artist needs to be taken more seriously by both the viewing public and the artists themselves. While the process is always a slow one, it becomes crucial for the artist to create first without the fear of public opinion.

Discussion and recommendations on engagement beyond the Art Camp

In a bid to extend the engagement between artists beyond the Art Camp, an Internship/Mentorship programme was conceptualised for young Bhutanese artists at the studios of the Indian artists. It was agreed that VAST will begin the process of compiling and sending profiles of interested students at the earliest.

Conclusion

The India-Bhutan Cultural Exchange and Art Camp proved to be a great platform for opening new creative possibilities between participating artists. Artists from both countries were exposed to the many facets of Bhutanese hospitality, while understanding and appreciating popular as well as traditional arts and culture of each other's countries. The interactions and discussions were engaging and will contribute greatly towards expanding the scope of their own art form.

