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An Interview with Prafulla Mohanti

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An Interview with Prafulla Mohanti

Geoff Kain

Praufulla Mohanti was born and brought up in the village of Nanpur, Orissa, India. He lives most of the year in London, but returns to his village, where he owns a home, for a part of every year. Prafulla Mohanti came to England in 1960 after graduating as an architect in Bombay. He worked for a time as architect-town planner for the Greater London Council, but now devotes himself to painting and writing. He has held many exhibitions in England, the U.S., Japan, and Europe, and his paintings are held in a variety of museums and public and private collections. He has published four books—My Village, My Life (Praeger, 1974), Indian Village Tales (Davis-Poynter, 1975), Through Brown Eyes (Oxford University Press, 1985), and Changing Village, Changing Life (Penguin, 1990); he is currently at work on a fifth book. Geoffrey Kain interviewed Prafulla Mohanti in his London home, 30 July, 1998.

GK: In all that you have written, and in your discussions of your paintings, it is clear that you see yourself as "of" the village—that your identity has been shaped by the village . . . and yet since 1960 most of your time has been spent in London. How does the village continue to shape or inform your response to life in London?

PM: There is a saying in India that you hold your world in your body. So you carry it around in you. Actually, I have never left the village, either physically or emotionally or spiritually because for me the two worlds are not really separate, they are one. Wherever I go, I carry my village inside of me. Particularly, when you come to the West and there is so much that is pitted against you, it's quite natural that you will go back to the village, to your roots, to the people who have acknowledged you, and given you love and a sense of security. As I said the other day about my identity—when I first left the village and went to the town, I met up with a completely new way of life, so I had to learn it for myself. And I never felt that I belonged to the town, to the city; it was a new way of life which had no relationship to my village way of life. Then when I came to England, people would not let me belong here because I have always been viewed as an outsider. The only place I *could* belong was my village.

So there are two things I can do, really: I can go back, physically, and live there and belong there, or I can create my spiritual home inside me. So what I can do is go and sit in Hyde Park, on a bench, and say that I belong there because it is my home—*until* someone comes along and says, "Look, you don't belong here. Get out of this place."

GK: Has that actually happened?

PM: It has. A few years ago I was in St. James's Park during the day, sitting on a bench, writing a letter. A young man (and a young woman with him) came up to me and snatched the letter away from me. He held the letter up and went around with it, saying, "Ooh, he's writing a love letter." I said, "Please give my letter back to me." So he crumpled up the letter and threw it back at me—"Here you are, you Paki bastard."

GK: How did you respond to that?

PM: I didn't say anything. But, as I say, it is very hard to *belong* here, to be accepted here. It is hard to develop self-confidence; intellectually and spiritually you are made to feel insecure because, at bottom, you are not wanted here.

GK: But you have been here for nearly forty years now. You came in 1960. Do you feel as much an outsider now as you did then? In the late 1970s, the "Paki Go Home" and National Front graffiti was much more evident than it is now.

PM: Yes, but when I cam here in 1960, I didn't know anything about the racism here—or about the British way of life. I knew *nothing*. I was just told in the village that England was the "land of the gods," that people here were kind, generous, . . . that there was no poverty, no suffering; it was a paradise, according to the villagers in Orissa. I came here expecting justice. When I arrived here, there was no immigration restriction, so I was given free entry into Britain. Although my passport was stamped in India, in Bombay, it was not stamped here. I came and went like any other Englishman would. Then gradually the British government introduced new regulations, laws, taking my rights away. So on my passport it said "given leave to enter this country for two years." These new rules and regulations turned me into an immigrant, and immigrants were not wanted here. It meant that I should be sent back to India. This situation was hotly debated in government from about the mid-60s.

GK: So why have you stayed? Why did you not go back to India?

PM: I came here because it was a journey into the unknown. It was very exciting. When I was studying town planning in Leeds, I really, really loved England . . . the English countryside, and also what people wanted to do—for instance, the national health scheme. And I got encouragement from my teachers, and I got a job here in London as an architect-planner. I enjoyed all that, but there was no overt expression of racism then. Although it was there—I found that this racism also gave me the strength to prove that I was not only as good as the British architects were, but in some ways I was better. Although I did not

actually express it, in my work it showed. Many people were jealous of me in the office. Everything came so naturally to me because I was bringing a new perspective to the British way of life which they themselves didn't understand or didn't value. I said, "Look, there are so many beautiful things—you mustn't destroy them." And I found the East End romantic, in a sense, because there are some beautiful buildings, and many of the people living there seemed honest and fair, and they were simple. But my colleagues would say, "The East End? You should *never* want to live there." And they would not want to visit me there, saying I should really be in the West End.

So I *did* like England when I first got here. Everything was an adventure; to tackle the unknown was really exciting for me. But I had no idea there would be so much violence in this society. If I had known, of course I would have been more self-conscious. And also I didn't know much about the British class system. Being a writer, being an artist, I was also interested in dance and I wanted to bring all of these art forms together. And I felt I could offer this place my writing, my painting, my work as an architect.

GK: You will recall that Jean Fisher [editor of *Third Text*] pointed out how the class system has exerted its influence over the public spaces where artwork can be seen by a large public. Do you feel that the potency of the class system has kept you out, as an artist? Has it prevented you from exhibiting your work?

PM: Well, I suppose I *have* been held out, to some extent, because [those who control the most visible exhibition spaces] feel that those of us from the colonies really have nothing to offer them. Also, I am someone from the village in India; I don't have anything to offer them here.

GK: I suppose I'm thinking of her characterization of this "marginalizing" of Black British artists as something that binds this "group" of individuals. Do you see this as applying to you? Are you comfortable being included among "Black British artists"?

PM: I don't like that label, and they've always wanted to put that label on me. I knew most of those artists she was talking about (Aubrey Williams, Rashid, . . .). I've had discussions with them, and this "black" label really divides artists and, for me, artists belong to the world, not just to one particular territory. They are the ones who can bring the world together because it is a fragmented world right now. But, to be fair, some artists also place this label on themselves, or at least accept it, because if you say that "I am black" you can get grants from the Arts Council. But if you say that you are "an artist," you probably won't get them. You have to compete with other artists with equal ability, so your work has to be good to be recognized. It shouldn't matter about the color of your skin or which culture you come from. At the same time, though, you need to understand your cultural heritage.

When I first came, in the 1960s, some gallery owners and museum directors were very appreciative of artists from outside because they felt they were bringing new ideas to Britain. Then what happened? Things became more parochial—it was British art or American art or German art or Italian . . . so they wanted to put this label on the artists and guard the boundaries and not let others come in.

GK: Another label in common usage now, of course, is "post-colonial," and listening and reading statements from various artists I have certainly become aware of their rather uniform discomfort with that label. I am wondering how you feel about this. Also, there are some in Britain who are claiming that if you are *not* a post-colonial, you may not be in a good position to receive something like the Booker Prize, for example . . . that it is now being routinely given to minorities—not being denied them.

PM: I don't think it is because they are minorities. It is because they are good. I really don't believe they are getting these prizes *because* they are from the colonies. Unfortunately, what has happened in England is that the lifestyle has become too monotonous. People eat the same kind of food, they see the same kind of theater, . . . it is monotonously uniform.

GK: A need to "jazz up the menu," as someone has put it?

PM: [laughs] Yes. Actually, these authors have the advantage of understanding another culture, another world, so they bring a new dimension to the English literary landscape. Otherwise, I'm afraid, it would be very, very dull. It *is* really dull, actually, English literature.

GK: Well . . . . Now we have all these people, including yourself, bringing new things into British culture and transforming the culture—although the categories are still distinct. It seems to me that as we call people "Black British" we are already—and intentionally—compartmentalizing them, not identifying them as "British," but as "Black British," which is a separate category. But . . . if you bring the village with you here, to London, and other people are coming from other places and bringing their homelands with them, when you go *back* to the village, as you do every year—and have been doing every year since you left it—what of British culture do you take there, and has this had any noticeable impact? Is there any identifiable influence you've exerted, intentionally or unintentionally, on the village by virtue of your change in habits, change in language, . . .?

PM: What my time here has done is to help me to understand my village better. If I had not traveled to England, I would have no other culture to compare my village with. Coming here, I was able to see my village from a distance, to see it in an objective manner. When I was studying town planning, my whole idea was to create a world where everyone could be happy and smiling. That was the ideal. I came here and found

almost no smiling faces at all. I was really shocked. Then I realized that if the poverty and suffering of the village could be removed, the village would be an ideal place to live. One attraction of the village, for instance, is man's relationship with nature, which is *very* important. If we had that in the cities, for instance, I think that our life would be very different. If we could all see a plant grow, a tree grow outside our window, then we might better understand the meaning of life. But if you live in a concrete box surrounded by other concrete boxes, you don't understand the meaning of life, actually.

GK: In London, one can go to the many parks—I believe that something like 11% of the city area is park, or small squares, small greens . . . So your feeling is, from your vantage point as town planner (back when), that those bits and pieces, or the components of those vast parks should be filtered into . . .

PM: . . . into the living space. Exactly. For everyone, not just for some. The tree outside the window, at least, will bring the countryside within the reach of my experience. With the tree will come the birds, the tree will change after the seasons,--with that I can better understand spring, summer, winter, whatever.

GK: With the separation from the elements of nature you are describing, with increasing urbanization and congestion, what are people losing? What are they missing? What are they without, and why does that matter?

PM: They lose their contact with life, actually. And this may help to explain why they are so afraid of expressing love. There are so many lonely people in London. Every Wednesday I work with a group of elderly people, a club I was introduced to about two years ago. I went there the first time—to the "Spice and Rice Club," it is called. The purpose of the club is to understand other cultures, through their food. In this club there are people from Russia and from Austria and from Ireland . . . from India and Pakistan . . . . I went there for lunch, and I saw that everyone ate their lunch without talking to anybody. So I started a human relations group, and they told their stories: where they came from, how they came to be here, how they live, what they left at home . . . . And now they sing, they dance, they paint; now this group has become a lively group [laughs]. It's wonderful to see how that group has changed in just months. I've really tried to help them to get to know the other person, to get together. Yesterday I was talking to a new group member, a woman, about 85, from Russia, who said she was giving up on learning English. I asked her why and she said, "Who should I talk to, have my conversations with? Myself, in the bathroom?" You know, you can go around, do your shopping, without talking to anybody. Nobody wants to talk to you. For many, there is no one to talk to here,

except for yourself. So that's what she meant—apparently, she just talks to herself in the bathroom.

GK: Is that an English reality, a London phenomenon, or just "life in the city"? Well, . . . one thing that interests me is that you have so much of your life invested in and created by your village, yet so much of your time is spent in London. Still, you go back to your village so often, so regularly, that I want to say you must be at home in both places, but now I have to *ask* that question. I am thinking here of the question of hybridity. Homi Bhabha talks of a "third space" which results from the antagonism or collision between two spaces—in your case, Nanpur and London—and that someone like you then necessarily occupies a third space that is neither one nor the other, but a unique space resulting from the tension between the two. Does that accurately describe your experience, or do you just feel like a Nanpur citizen who happens to live in London?

PM: For me, Nanpur and London should be able to exist together. If I want to have dinner in Nanpur and then return to London, I should be able to do that. But, of course, I can't. But I really don't see why it should be just *this* or *that*. I think they should be able to exist side by side and both benefit from each other's culture, ways of life. I think that Nanpur has a lot to offer the world. I'd love to spend more time in Nanpur than in London, actually. It would be wonderful just to sit under the blue sky or the moonlit sky. But why I don't live in the village right now, I think, is that I would be forced at this point to become a social worker. People come to me with *all* of their problems. If somebody's ill and needs money to go to hospital, or somebody's son needs money for education, or somebody's hungry and needs food. I'm afraid I wouldn't have any time for myself, at all, just to think. I just can't ignore all the suffering around me, close my doors, particularly when the government doesn't do anything, really, to relieve the suffering. I can't just say it's *my* life that I want to live. Some people can do that, but I just can't do it.

GK: I listened to Farrukh Dhondy speak yesterday, and he alluded to the film *The Bandit Queen* as one attempt to counteract the Indian film industry's tendency to romanticize the village, the countryside, as the place of innocence, of good hearts, and beauty, in contrast to the rottenness, the corruption and suffering and oppression, of the city. In fact, he claims, the opposite is true. Many leave the countryside for the cities, and very few return. You are an example of one who *does* return—albeit on a part-time basis—and you *do* speak of the beauty and innocence of the village—but you've also just described the suffering there (as you do in *My Village, My Life* and *Changing Village, Changing Life*). Can you respond directly to Mr. Dhondy's characterization of the countryside?

PM: I don't think he knows anything about the Indian village life. He has never lived there. He has lived in Bombay and in this country. Only if you live there can you truly know what the village life is like. One thing he doesn't mention, maybe doesn't understand, is the system of support in the village. In time of need, real need, they will all come to help you. The other thing is that you live because others want you to live—unlike here, where you live because *you* want to live. Again, in the village you live because other people want you to live. They look after you, though life can be hard. When I was growing up, I was looked after by other people, I didn't look after myself. I served other people, and other people served me. But I didn't *learn* how to serve myself, and here you have to know how to do that because if you come here alone there is nobody else to look after you. In the village, if I say that I am having pain, for instance, the whole village will come to see what they can do for me, to relieve my pain. Here, if I say I am experiencing pain, nobody will want to hear—unless I pay them money. This is one aspect of village life Farrukh Dhondy does not understand.

And what the village has also helped me to understand—the basic philosophy of life, of existence—here in the West it is "produce more, consume more, waste more." So man is in a trap. He can't escape. But in the village, it's "produce what you can, consume as little as possible, and waste nothing." That removes a lot of stress from you. There you produce what you can, but here you are forced to continue to produce more.

GK: Do you feel that way as a painter—that you *must* keep producing?

PM: It's very dangerous, really, because here I believe you are evaluated by how many paintings you are completing, how many exhibitions you have and where they are held, how many books you have written and how many you have sold, how much money you have, how much you are making compared to last year, . . . But what about the quality of your life? Your success, your worth, is measured in commercial terms, terms of production and consumption, in a materialistic way, not in a spiritual way.

GK: How will such a system work itself out, in your opinion? Where does a system like that end?

PM: I'm afraid that these values, these values that are of the West, I mean, are clearly affecting Indian traditional values, also. These traditional values *are* being neglected, and Western values are being welcomed. I am talking in a fairly narrow sense, just about the "Western materialistic world." Of course, there are plenty of people who do not entirely embrace these values, and some who reject them, I know that. But those with more spiritual values don't have much of a chance, I'm afraid, to protest against the system, which is like a bulldozer. The ancient Buddhist King Ashok used to say, "I will treat my subjects as my

children." There's another saying in the Indian village: "The aim of wealth is to do *dharma*." *Dharma* means helping others to live well, not yourself alone, but others. That has been the basis of Indian village life. You must work on helping others.

So when Farrukh Dhondy says these things about the village . . . *of course* there is greed, that's human nature. And Hindus also believe that man is both destructive and constructive; both energies exist side by side inside everybody. What you try to do is use your creative energy, try to control—or come to terms with—your destructive energy. In the process of creation, there must be destruction; you must destroy to create. For instance, in writing on a piece of paper, even, you are destroying the blank sheet of paper, you are taking its identity away. You have scratched it with your pen; that is *certainly* an act of violence. I'm afraid that to put your ideas on to a piece of paper is a violent act because you are invading and changing that space.

GK: Let's consider colonialism as a principal example of "invading and changing a space." In other words, let's consider the village as "post-colonial space." Is it fair to do this? Or has Nanpur carried on virtually untouched by colonialism and the newer "cultural imperialism," etc.?

PM: Well, colonization is destructive . . . because it is designed to make you feel inferior . . . although, I suppose I can imagine myself being colonized out of love, in which case it could actually benefit both of us—you as colonizer and me as colonized. One can't think of colonization as a colonization only of the physical space, but also of the mental space. When I am talking to you and you are talking to me, you are trying to inject your ideas into my consciousness, and I am also trying to invade yours. I was born in India during the colonial period, but in Nanpur we didn't know anything, really, about colonization. I never saw any Brit in my village; in fact, I didn't see a Brit at all until I was about twenty years old. But you may wonder about the language—that through the English language I was colonized, for instance. But I taught myself English.

What is happening in India now is that one group is trying to colonize another, *inside* India. For instance, Orissa has many tribal people who have their own way of life, in the forests. And the people who live on the plains, and who are educated, want to tell the tribals that "your way of life is not good. You should have *our* way of life, live the way *we* live." So they are trying to impose their way of life on others. So colonization in India continues—not directly through the British any longer, but now through already colonized Indians. These Indians are products of colonization. And that is what worries me. Very few people, I think, really stop and think, "Who *are* these Indians? These people who produced such beautiful temples, just who *were* they? What was the consciousness that produced this sensibility responsible for these beautiful temples, for example?"

Now we see an increasingly materialistic world—colonization through television, through satellite television. It's not just Coca-Cola and blue jeans. All kinds of *ideas* are coming through television.

GK: Television is changing people's way of life?

PM: Oh, yes, quite a lot. Two years ago I went to visit some people, not in my village, but in another town. When I got there, the father and son were watching television. They ignored me completely. I sat there for half an hour, completely ignored. Then they said, "Why didn't you tell us you were coming? If we had known, we could have entertained you, prepared you food, . . ." This never happened before.

GK: So you are suggesting that television increases the distance between people?

PM: Yes.

GK: And you think that the images and values conveyed via television are also creating this widening distance between people?

PM: Yes. When people see things on television, they want to buy them. When consumerism comes—well, when there are those who *can* afford these things, and those who cannot, there is clearly a growing separation there.

GK: Do you see this kind of colonization as intentional and aggressive? *Is* it cultural imperialism? Or is it just something that happens: an expressive discourse coming out of the West that happens to influence those who tune into it? Are the values and desires created because the technology is being adopted, or is it an intended program of creating ever-broader markets?

PM: It is a way of expanding markets, not a method of educating people. Those who profit do not concern themselves with educating people—in fact, they would like them to be ignorant. For instance, if I were educated to keep my needs simple, many of these businesses would go bust. But when we are taught to "produce more, consume more, waste more," I am bound to look for things that aren't really needed. I would leave the shop after buying some cloth or a bottle of milk, and say, "I really don't need anything else." But the way I think poses a danger to the colonizer. People should be educated to choose things for themselves, and nothing should really be forced on them. But I'm afraid we don't want this way of life, we apparently want the other [most wasteful] way of life.

GK: And where does art fit into a world like the one you are describing—a world driven by consumerism and expansionist capitalism?

PM: There's very little art any more. It's all commodity. I wouldn't call it art.

GK: What about your art?

PM: [laughs] Well, my art is ordinarily not intended for sale; it is not produced to be a marketplace commodity. And I think that is ideally how it should be. If there is someone who likes a painting—well, instead of paying a price for it, the painting could be given in exchange for a service. Say, if I were to go to a doctor and be treated in exchange for one of my paintings . . . or another person could give me a certain amount of sugar for another painting. I think that's how I would like to see the world operate. Not through money, but through services and through the things you love and can do with your hands and give to other people.

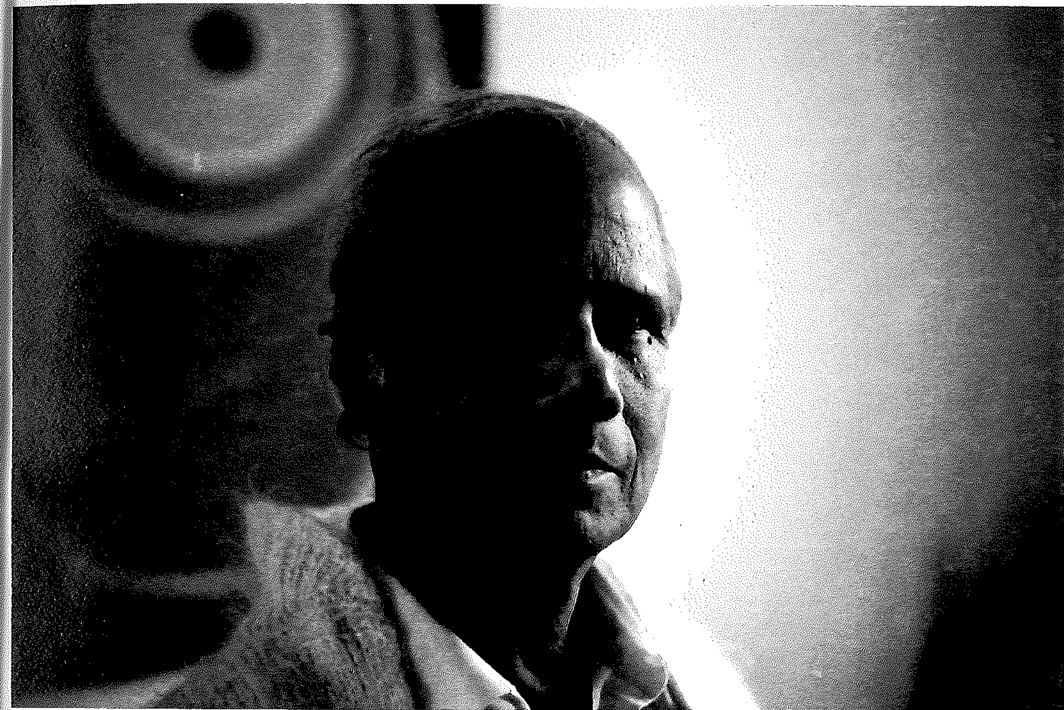
GK: Well, if art *is* primarily a commodity now, or is used to promote other commodities in Western and Westernized or Westernizing societies, how does art fit into the scheme of life in the village?

PM: In the village it's not just "art" as painting or whatever, it's the art of life, the art of living; they are integrated. The way of life is very, very artistic. Art (as we think of it) is also part of daily life. For example, my mother looked after our house as if it were her baby: she kept it clean and tidy, and she would decorate it with rice paste. By looking at it you could say, "Yes, this is the house of Prafulla's mother." It is an artistic expression of her Self as an artist, as a human being. To me, everyone is an artist. We all have the potential to be artists; we can all create. We are all critics, as well. That's how we double up in life.

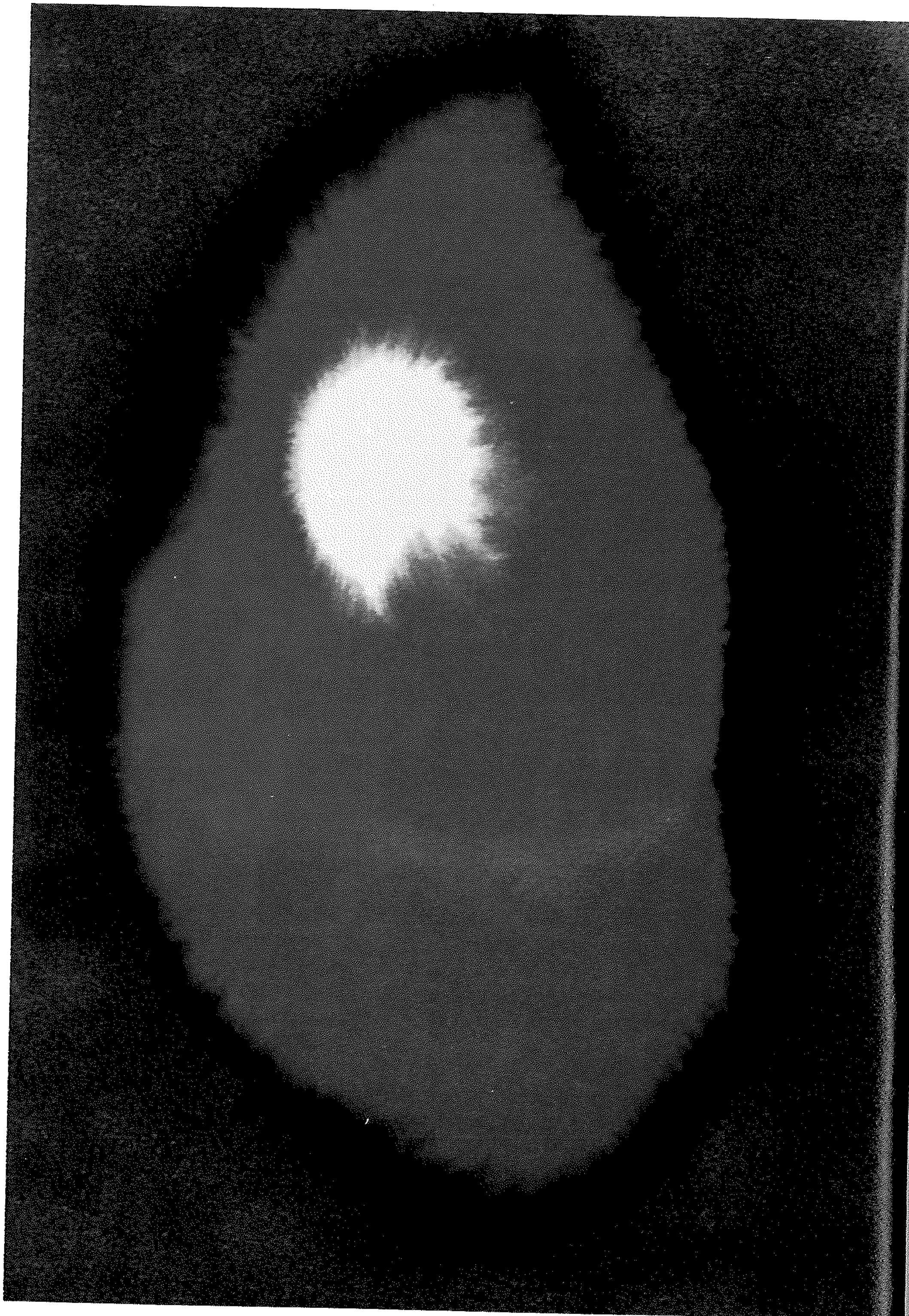
In the village, art is not just about decoration, it is a way of life. A pot, a sari, a piece of jewelry—*everything* is handmade using mechanical means to help the hand, rather than having machines that make the hand redundant. That's what worries me in the West—the body has become redundant, the *brain* has become redundant . . . the human being has become totally redundant now. People can't think for themselves, can't count without using a calculator, . . .

GK: Shades of the Luddite. How does one keep the human relevant in the increasingly mechanized and commercialized world you describe?

PM: Through education. So that young people can understand their bodies, their minds, and their environment, their world, so they can make their own choices. People should be helped to make their own choices, to discover what they want from life . . . and what kind of world



Prafulla Mohanty



"Agni" (Fire)

we want. I don't think our politicians are interested in knowing what kind of world we might want, they are interested in telling us what kind of world we will have. They don't want people to participate, really, they want to dictate our collective identity.

GK: How important is storytelling in allowing people in the village to discover their identity? How important that traditional tales—like those you have translated as *Indian Village Tales*—are told again and again?

PM: Extremely important.

GK: Why? Because otherwise they are replaced by the homogenizing influence of television?

PM: Example: when I was young and we would walk to the town, to the railway station, for instance, it would take half a day, and on the way we would stop by the roadside, rest, and tell stories. In that way, it wasn't just going from point A to point B; the journey itself was a beautiful experience. But now there is a road congested with traffic, with buses . . . people can't even find a space, let alone talk to each other, carry on a conversation. Because of similar changes, the art of storytelling in India is dying out.

GK: But the optimistic view, regarding talking to one another, is that new telecommunications technology—such as e-mail, internet chat, etc., is allowing people in distant places, from different cultures, often of different races, to communicate so easily, so readily, if not in the village, exactly, then in the so-called "global village." And I have to say that London itself is clearly a more cosmopolitan place than it was even twenty years ago, when it was exceptionally cosmopolitan. So many people from so many places coming together . . . or are they really not coming together?

PM: But they are not educated how to cope with each other. The British still feel, I believe, that these newcomers are invading *their* space and taking their opportunities away from them. Of course, these people can *contribute* to their space—contribute ways of life. So instead of thinking of the outsiders who come here as an asset, generally they think of them as problems, and this problem should be removed rather than solved. That's a terrible aspect of Europe, as well.

GK: The number of migrants increases steadily each year, as does global population . . . .
PM: But it is not just a matter of population, of course. Here, it's people coming from the colonies. They come here because some of them are invited to come here—but most of them are not invited. Somehow, they thought they would come here and contribute to the British economy

and then they would leave . . . but many stayed on and had children, and the children grow up and have children, and . . .

GK: . . .and they become British?

PM: I don't think the government had thought about them in this way. Initially, they wanted to exploit them; they exploited them in Africa or India and they wanted to exploit them here. They would provide cheap labor, that was the main aim in inviting them in. And somehow, I guess, they just thought that they would just disappear after contributing to the British economy. I suppose they had no idea that so many would just hang on. . . .

GK: And now they belong here? The second and third generation offspring . . . ?

PM: No, they don't know where they belong. I think they are seen as belonging to the colonies and, here, to the colonizer.

GK: But don't you see the division or distinction as Black British evaporating as new generations are born here to those who had earlier come from the colonies?

PM: No, because if you are black, you remain black. I suppose we all have prejudiced views—but the main thing is not to express your prejudices through violence, physical violence. You have read my account in *Through Brown Eyes* about being beaten up. I continue to have pain from that, terrible back pain. Head injury, back injury . . .and my perception of things has been changed completely. I didn't know until then that there is an emotion called *fear*; now I am afraid to be out at night, to be traveling alone, ... When I am among friends, I am an artist, a writer, an architect, but when I am alone on the streets, I am an immigrant. And we are not wanted here. I am *made* to feel that way.

GK: Has it been difficult to get your paintings out in front of a fairly large public?

PM: I had my first exhibition in Leeds in 1964. The Leeds City Gallery bought a painting and also another city gallery bought a painting. I have also been invited by many universities here to have exhibitions; I have had exhibitions here in London which have been successes. But I was feeling pretty much uncomfortable in this world of art and literature. I was also interested in relating movement to painting; in 1970-71 I gave many demonstrations relating light to movement to painting; how the figures in the paintings are like dancers. This was new. And I invited the art critics, as well as the dance critics. The dance critics came, but the art critics didn't come because this form of art was unknown to them at the time. If this had been done by an American artist or a British artist

they would have said, "Oh, yes, he is contributing to our art here, but since he is coming from India with an Indian sensibility, Indian ethos, how can it be part of *our* art form?" So I tried instead to approach publishers about publishing a book about life in my village—and that actually did *very* well, and I was quite pleased with myself, actually. Then in 1974, when there was a background of racial tension created by the government, with the introduction of legislation—debates in the Parliament about Britain being invaded by Indians or Pakistanis or Bangladeshis or Indians from Africa, all that, . . .then, in 1974 I was beaten up one night. I was unconscious and taken to hospital, and I stayed there for two days. Unfortunately, I didn't receive the right kind of treatment. Anyway, that incident was a total rejection of my existence in Britain, actually. I felt that people here all wanted me to disappear from this place, but it was only these working class people who expressed this through their body language . . .in ways that the better educated wouldn't do. They would write about it, or debate it in Parliament. But their sentiment of "immigrants go home" definitely encouraged more ignorant youths to express this in physical violence. It was a daily occurrence. From that day I really wanted to withdraw from Britain. I told myself there was really no point in showing my paintings to these people; they didn't deserve to see my work. They didn't deserve to see my dance. They didn't deserve to read my books. So I didn't make an attempt from then on to try to get to know these people again because I felt that nothing was really being done to stop this thoughtless violence against helpless people.

But people I knew before tried to take me out of my shell. So I started exhibiting in India much more often than in Britain. I also exhibited in Japan and in Italy. Somehow I just couldn't put myself in that position; I thought, "You've already done this, and they've rejected you." Being beaten that night by a racist gang was a total rejection. I realized I had to help myself. Since then, publishers have seen the merits of my written works and published them, and my paintings have been seen by thousands of people who like them. But I honestly think I haven't quite forgiven . . . . But I guess it's good that it happened, at the same time, because it's taught me more about my village.

GK: Regarding lessons of the village, . . . anyone who sees your work sees the recurrent appearance of the circle as a central motif. What part does village philosophy play in the forms of your painting?

PM: When I was three years old, I was taught to draw three perfect circles on the mud floor with a piece of clay chalk. I went on drawing the circles for at least six months or a year, saying as I drew each one, "Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar." When I analyze it in a critical way, I think that the man or woman who created that system was a genius—because Oriya script is very round, like circles, actually.

GK: Someone has said Oriya script looks like sheep following one another.

PM: [laughs] Yes, it's true. So when you practice a circle, at least in Orissa, your handwriting gets better. Not only that, of course,--it helps you to understand the meaning of meditation. "Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar"—I believe that just chanting these words, in a rhythmic way, induces a meditative state. It became a way of life for me, later on. The meaning of divinity is there: Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar. So these circles have been ingrained into my system. I can't help it. [laughs] Also, I don't want to stop it. If it comes naturally to me, I let it happen.

GK: Your paintings display the pattern of the circle, yet each one is different. Is that a philosophical choice, or just an artistic fact?

PM: When I draw circles, I am at one with myself. So, I suppose you can say that the circle represents the world, it represents a human, it represents a flower . . . . Even if you take the human figure—there are so many ways of drawing it. Similarly, the circle can be drawn in so many different ways. So the circles are like figures. Certainly, the circles can have meaning—the symbolism is there because it is from the spiritual village landscape which I have received—the circle, the meaning of the circle. Shalagrams, little oval stones, were worshipped by my mother, and the forms used in the village are mostly circular. Forms can be abstracted, reduced to the circle, reduced further to the point, the *bindu*, then abstracted to shunya, the nothingness form which all things emanate . . . then become bindu, circle, and the many forms of life again.

GK: So when you are completing work in the village, and people there look at your work, how do they understand the circle?

PM: They don't necessarily see it as Brahma, Vishnu, Maheswar, as I drew these circles as a child, but they do see the form as divine because the circle form in the village *is* divine. And they see the sun, the moon, ... What is interesting is that a few years ago there was a book fair in Delhi, and I had a stall where I displayed my books and one of my paintings. In the morning, a group of holy men came, and they looked at the painting, and they discussed it among themselves—and thought that maybe they should have it in their ashram, to meditate on. So they came up to me and asked how much, and I told them how much, and they left without saying anything. If they had said that they wanted to have the painting, I would gladly have given it to them, but they didn't. At lunch time, a westernized Indian came to the stall and asked me, "What is this painting doing in a book fair?" I said, "Why shouldn't I have a painting here?" He asked what the painting meant, and I asked him what it meant to him. "Oh," he said, "it looks like an embryo." "OK, it's an embryo." Then, around 4:00 in the afternoon, a boy about seven or eight years old came, very excited, and brought his father along. The boy

pointed excitedly to the painting, and spoke to his father in a dialect I did not understand. I asked his father, "What does the painting mean to him?" His father replied that to his son it was *Bhanda Mama* or "Uncle Moon." So all of these people are relating the work to their experiences.

GK: Does it matter to you that the white English audience—or any audience—may interpret the paintings differently than an Indian audience, with no understanding of the associations the circle has with your native village culture—which is where the paintings spring from?

PM: It doesn't matter to me at all. As an artist, I don't paint just to sell. I paint because I need to paint, I need to communicate with myself. I want to keep my painting in that mode. I don't plan, I just paint to express myself.

GK: Do you begin with a blank sheet of paper, or blank canvas, and go right into it from there?

PM: Yes.

GK: So the paintings are improvisational?

PM: Yes. You know, when I was working as an architect-planner, each line had a meaning. Each line cost money, was related to someone else's life. This put so much restriction on me. I couldn't *really* express myself, so my painting has helped me to communicate with myself.

GK: You discuss communicating with yourself . . . . Your books are autobiographical. Can you say anything about the connection between the autobiographical texts you've written and their connections to your paintings?

PM: When I'm writing, I'm writing for other people.

GK: What sort of audience do you have in mind? I mean it seems that your primary purpose is to expose or explain the ways of the village to those who wouldn't otherwise know it—or is your audience just some amorphous "other"?

PM: Well, no, it's even the people in the village, actually, hoping they might better understand themselves by speaking of their own lives. When I wrote *My Village, My Life*, I felt there was something important for me to say. I wrote it because I felt people should know about a way of life that has existed for centuries, and that still has meaning for them. That's why I wrote the book. If I had written it as fiction, people might say, "Oh, no, that doesn't exist." But this is a real place, it is there.

GK: Is it because Britain held much of India as a colonial possession for so long that you wanted to write the book, and then publish it *here*?

PM: Well, yes. I felt I was able to give Nanpur, a north Indian village, a voice, a voice in which they could speak about themselves, directly, to the outside world. Before *My Village, My Life*, there wasn't a single book about an Indian village written by an Indian villager. The British wrote about various villages, of course, though mostly about famous people and famous cities. But not about ordinary human beings in an ordinary place. Through my work I was able to give the village an identity.

GK: Have you served to increase tourism to your village? [Laughs] I was reading in *Changing Village, Changing Life* that there have now been several foreign visitors who have come to Nanpur after reading *My Village, My Life*, or maybe after seeing the BBC documentary on the village which you narrated.

PM: Well, some Japanese and some Australians have turned up in the village, to see if it really exists.

GK: You mentioned to me earlier that you had attended a literary conference in India on the topic of colonialism, and that you were a bit puzzled to find repeated references to colonization as if it were an appropriation of space only. Where do you see colonization in India to have extended to, and how does it express itself—I am particularly interested here in what you might be seeing in your own village.

PM: The problem is that India is run by people who are still colonized. India has not been able to find its identity. It is still colonized in spirit. For instance, most believe that if a book is published in England, it *must* be better than a book published in India.

GK: And you have published in England . . . .

PM: Yes, but you see, when *Through Brown Eyes* was published, Oxford India also decided it would release the book in India, but they ordered only fifty copies for all of India. When I went to see their publisher in Delhi, I asked him "Why only 50 copies?" He said, "Oh, the book is not dead yet. We will get some more copies." They didn't. And then it was published later by Penguin in paperback, and it got a *lot* of response in India. And one day I met with Oxford India's marketing manager, and he said, "Oh, Mr. Mohanti, I like your book so much. It's wonderful." I said, "You like my book so much that you purchased only fifty copies for all of India." [Laughs] The publisher had said that they are academic publishers, not publishers of general books. Previously, when *My Village, My Life* was published, I wanted it to be published in India, separately, because then it would be cheaper for an Indian market. One publisher rejected it because they said, "Who in India wants to read a

book about an Indian village written by an Indian? There is no market." When Corgi published it in 1976 in India, after it had been published in England—where it did very well—it became a best seller in India. It was also translated into Japanese. This was my first book, and when I first raised the issue with a publisher friend of mine, he only said, "I hope you can write as well as you paint."

GK: Do you think of yourself, now, as a painter who also writes, or a writer who also paints, or . . .?

PM: I am an artist who paints and writes. There are things I cannot express through my writing; not everything can be expressed through words. I feel that as an art form painting is purer than writing. Words have more restricted meanings, but I can paint as I please. When painting, I don't have to worry over meaning and "correct" or "accurate" usage or manners of expression, I can just let myself go. But being a painter, I think, helps me to use words like brush strokes—in fact, the critics have picked up on this.

GK: Yes, your style of writing is quite spare—not many embedded structures, complex syntax, . . . and I think that in that way, at least, there is a definite continuity between your painting and writing styles.

PM: Yes.

GK: Is this stylistic simplicity a cultivated reaction or response to—an outgrowth of—your village experience?

PM: It's very difficult to be simple. If people are not clear in their mind, in their thoughts, they can actually hide behind their jargon. I'm afraid that is what I find terrible now in art criticism and in literary criticism. So, yes, the village has helped me to understand the meaning of simplicity.

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Collections Holding Paintings by Prafulla Mohanti

The British Museum
National Gallery of Modern Art and Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi
Leeds City Art Gallery
University of Leeds
University of Kent
Museum of Modern Art, Berkeley
Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta
Air India
First National City Bank, Manila
Indian Council for Cultural Relations

Embry-Riddle University

STRONGEST AT THE LAST

They grow so easily here, so abundantly
we don't notice them until they bloom--
long after the showy floats of forsythia and azalea,
after the waving nosegays of jasmine and wisteria.
After the beauty queens are uncrowned
and resume their ordinary lives,

the gardenias begin
to turn their spotlights on, the first glow
growing within the spiral buds
spreading themselves wider
and whiter, the unwrapped petals
white as rising cream, the odor thickening
until it seems more substance than scent, a lotion
laving us, seeping into us, changing us.

We fill all our vases and jars, bottles and cups,
whatever we have to hold them, every room
mystical with them, our bed lit with them,
our bodies like gardenias
achieving their fullest, sweetest power
as they fade and turn heavy with age.

Eric Nelson