

# JHAVERI CONTEMPORARY

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## **Thinking Tantra**

Curated by Rebecca Heald  
24 January – 05 March 2016

Tantra is a body of beliefs and practices that enables individuals to conjoin with something much larger than themselves—nothing short of cosmic forces. Tools (in the broadest sense) that facilitate transcendence are omnipresent for those who are attuned: rituals, drawings, maps, sculptures, and chants, to name just a few.

*Thinking Tantra* is the first in a series of exhibitions that present a speculative history of the intersections of Tantra with art. It starts with work from the 1960s by Indian artists who either practiced Tantric rituals, were part of the Neo-Tantra movement, or appreciated Tantra as a socially relevant form of self-expression—Prabhakar Barwe, Biren De, Prafulla Mohanti, Sohan Qadri, Jagdish Swaminathan, and Acharya Vyakul. The exhibition continues with work by contemporary international artists who make a connection between Tantric artworks they have seen and experienced, predominantly drawings, and their own ways of working—Tom Chamberlain, Shezad Dawood, Goutam Ghosh, Alexander Gorlizki, Jean-Luc Moulene, Anthony Pearson, Prem Sahib, and Claudia Wieser.

There is a type of Tantric drawing that has been increasingly shown in the West. Thanks to its geometry and use of bright colours it has an immediacy and vibrancy that in recent times has become popular, with exhibitions in Europe and America. The symbols and patterns used in these drawings are distillations of forms which first appeared in ancient Sanskrit texts. Copied from generation to generation, over centuries, their combination of refined shapes and palette makes the drawings curiously familiar, leading many viewers to make an instinctive link to Western abstract art. Yet the visual similarity belies a complete opposition of motives. Though abstract art in the West is often spoken of in metaphysical terms, it is predominantly aimed at enabling an individual (the artist) to find her or his place in the world, free from the collective sign system used in Tantra. Tantric art is made as a tool for meditation and for psychological rituals of elaborate complexity. Conventionally, these works are made anonymously by people who would not describe themselves as artists. Drawings are often inscribed on found paper, and they have an awesome functionality—to be used to connect with a panoply of cosmic forces, in order to visualise Ultimate Reality, or Nirvan.

A series of short insights into the works included in *Thinking Tantra* is presented below. They demonstrate the multiple and various ways in which artists engage with a rich variety of ideas and an abundance of materials.

*Thinking Tantra* at Jhaveri Contemporary is the first iteration of a project that will also manifest at the Drawing Room, London, in publication form, and in a series of interdisciplinary conversations.

### **Anonymous**

The Brahmanda, or Cosmic Egg, is the source of the universe and the subject of many traditional Tantric drawings. A collection of these was featured by Massimiliano Gioni, chief curator of the 2013 Venice Biennale.

### **Prabhakar Barwe**

'The very existence of art in our life is due to a need for spiritual experience.' For Barwe, Tantra was a way of thinking that encompassed everything, and he was dedicated to finding his own, specific and personal, version of it. This work is from the time Barwe spent working at the Weavers Service Centre, where artists worked with weavers in the development of textile designs. Between 1962 and 1965, Barwe lived in Varanasi and it is here that Tantric forms first captured his interest.

### **Tom Chamberlain**

Chamberlain has had a relationship with Tantric drawings, especially Shiva lingam drawings, for a decade and is intrigued by the notion that they are 'things that get used'. As is the case with all of his work, these paintings defy reproduction, they cannot be experienced via digital files or printed matter. Chamberlain deploys the act of looking as temporal agent and it is only through this act that the work comes into its own. Chamberlain wants his work to sharpen the senses, and to exist as a living entity, both in and of itself and for the viewer.

### **Shezad Dawood**

Dawood has a long-standing commitment to the exploration of the esoteric. Often fusing symbols from different mystical, religious, and philosophical traditions, he is absorbed by what he describes as 'the irrational and esoteric foundations of Modernism.' In work over the past decade he has often referenced Tantric symbols and philosophies directly. *CEJ 4* takes Le Corbusier's Chandigarh Parliament as its starting point, foregrounding questions of encounter and influence between European Modernism and the sacred and mystic geometries, including Tantric, that circulate in the Indian Subcontinent.

### **Biren De**

Biren De is one of the best-known Neo-Tantra artists, brought together by art historian and curator LP Sihare; he was part of the Tantra and subsequently Neo-Tantra exhibitions that travelled to Germany and the United States in the mid-1980s. Of Tantra he has said: 'For me, the essential meaning of Tantra is expansion: expansion of consciousness.' In this exhibition is one of his early works, the point at which he began to give up figurative work and concentrate solely on Tantric abstraction.

### **Nicola Durvasula**

Originally from the UK, Durvasula lived in India for a decade. Though her method of working is different from Tantrikas (practitioners of Tantra), nevertheless, as the scholar Francesca Fremantle suggests, if there are 'English Tantrics', she is definitely among them. Some years ago she acquired multiple copies of Drawing Room's publication 'Field of Colour', about a particular type of Tantric drawing from Jaipur and Udaipur. (These Tantric drawings have recently been most widely seen in the West.) She used these copies in different ways—some images she cut out and framed, some she used as a basis upon which make to new work, and some she transcribed: questions of agency, authorship, and appropriation abound. Also shown here are works that venture into the sonic realm of Tantra–Mantra (ritual conjoined with knowledge and theory). Symbols found in traditional Tantric drawings provide a starting point for new graphic notations.

### **Goutam Ghosh**

Ghosh's recent catalogue 'Ascribing to them birth, animation, sense and accident,' makes a number of direct references to Tantra, including an essay by Kaustubh Das on the encounter between Indian religious and spiritual practices and colonialism. He writes: 'Modernism has not been a mere search for absolute truth, as opposed to religious art. Rather it has been a move to appreciate the different shades of truth. In my case, I do not feel the need of any special permission—neither from a priest nor from a scientist—to access both of these fields of knowledge. I am my own priest in my temple and my own scientist in my laboratory.'

### **Alexander Gorlizki**

Gorlizki established a collaborative practice in Jaipur with master miniaturist painter Riyaz Uddin in 1996. From this time on, he also built up an extensive collection of early Indian vernacular drawings including Tantric diagrams and Yantras (literally, 'machines'), some dating as far back as the mid-18th century. For this exhibition, he shows works on paper that allude to this wide-ranging and historical material—esoteric and spiritual content is implicit, colour charts are used, while reference is also made to modernist Western formalism. Gorlizki also presents a moving image piece, a collaboration with Richard Coldman and Paul Kamuf (commissioned by Jhaveri Contemporary), that animates some of the drawings to create impressions of energised colour fields and vibrating forms and patterns.

### **Prafulla Mohanti**

Like Biren De, Mohanti was part of LP Sihare's so-called Neo-Tantra group. He has made art since the age of three: 'My painting is rooted in my village culture, which is influenced by yoga and Tantra. Art is a part of daily life. The lotus is the main symbol. The lotus of my childhood has undergone changes through abstraction, from a circle to a point. Absolute abstraction makes it disappear. From this nothingness life begins again and becomes everything, the total universe.'

### **Jean-Luc Moulene**

Moulene's ambition in making artworks is to give viewers the sensation that they are 'living and standing'. He first encountered Tantra drawings at the Centre Georges Pompidou's 'Magiciens de la Terre' exhibition (1989). Subsequently he came to own one, described as being of 'L'Ecole Vyakul', a reference to fellow artist Acharya Vyakul. For the Pompidou's 2011 'Paris-Delhi-Bombay', he undertook a series of complex experiments to imagine how a multi-coloured Tantra drawing might exist in three dimensions, work which continued and formed an important part of his Dia Beacon exhibition in 2013. In *Blue Horizon* (a work from 2012), Moulene continues to explore the possibilities of line, shadow, and alternative dimensions in art and the esoteric.

### **Anthony Pearson**

Pearson first encountered Tantra drawings at an exhibition in Santa Monica in 2011. He is preoccupied with archaic forms and the way in which these Tantra drawings—their shapes and their colours—have been remade for centuries. He has developed his own distinctive visual language, based on techniques such as solarisation, and treats the outcome of these experiments as specimens to trigger transportational states. Art critic Jonathan Griffin has said of Pearson: 'There is a sense that any single work of Pearson's is only a temporary stand-in for something else, something withheld or absent, or maybe something lost altogether.'

### **Prem Sahib**

With work often characterised by strong geometry and a bold palette, it is instinctively possible to find a neat place for Sahib in a suitable history of minimalism. Yet, this would deny the bodily and erotic dimension that runs current through all his work and that makes it so vital. In perhaps sweeping terms, the same could be said of Tantric drawings. However, as noted above, while they may bear similarities to Western abstraction, it must be recognised that they are born of a different tradition, one which is all-inclusive in its reach and which has bliss and ecstasy at its core.

### **Sohan Qadri**

Qadri abandoned representation early on in his long career and moved towards the incorporation of Tantric symbolism and philosophy into his vibrant minimalist works. It was the time he spent in silence and meditation in the Himalayas and Tibet, he said, that led him to paint. These later works, in impasto, are reminiscent of sculptural forms, and are testament to Qadri's ambition to create forms that transcend.

### **Jagdish Swaminathan**

Throughout his life, Swaminathan picked up and used symbols and shapes—the lotus, the lingam, the snake—beyond their traditional context. In the mid-1960s he experimented with geometrical shapes, combining triangles, rectangles, and circles in pure colour, titling work from the period the 'Colour Of Geometry Series'. Work from this period, including the piece in this

show, suggests the influence of Tantric Yantras, and his aim was to create works that could 'be absorbed in one glance, but the effect of which is discharged slowly, over time.'

### **Acharya Vyakul**

Vyakul was in Jean-Martin Hubert's 1989 landmark exhibition 'Magiciens de la Terre', billed as a Tantric artist. Kapil Jariwala wrote of him in 1998: 'Vyakul does not paint in a studio nor does he paint everyday, perhaps only twice a year and then in a concentrated spell for two or three weeks. He makes the paintings wherever he might be, in his house, on a walk, in a temple or in a garden. Often using materials close to hand, paper from ancient manuscripts, cloth or waste card are painted with pigment ground from anything that will give its colour: cow dung, leaves, coffee, vermilion or coal; it isn't unusual to find lipstick or felt-tip pens either.'

### **Claudia Wieser**

Wieser first encountered Tantric drawings via the publication 'Field of Color' while installing her 2011 exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York (the American publisher of the volume). Wieser's project has been described as one in which she 'recuperates a mystical Modernism'. She herself makes a connection between the Tantric drawings and exercises given to students at the Bauhaus, who were given set colours and shapes with which to make new combinations. There is another connection that might be made in relation to the Bauhaus's ambition to collapse the distinctions between artists and craftspeople, notably that Tantric drawings are not usually made by artists or as part of an artistic practice. Here, Wieser also presents sculptures. Made of simple shapes, like the drawings, they are the result of a lengthy process that involves sanding, oiling, and painting—traces of which are all left in the final versions.

**Rebecca Heald** is an independent curator. Recent projects include Trevor Paglen's 'An English Landscape' at Gloucester Road Tube station, the 'House of Ferment' at Borough Market with Grizedale Arts, and 'Points of Departure' at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London. Between 2009 and 2013, she was Director of New Contemporaries, the UK's foremost organisation working with new and emerging artists. She has worked across curatorial and education departments at Sadie Coles HQ, Tate Britain, and the Hayward Gallery. Currently with curator Tamsin Dillon, she is working to develop the next phase of the art programme at King's Cross, London, a major 67-acre site development, to include a series of major new commissions. She is Tutor in Curatorial Practice at the Royal College of Art, on the board of Liverpool Biennial, and writes regularly for a range of publications including *Frieze* and *Art Review*.