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Color, Shape and Structure: Abstraction in the Art of K.C.S. Paniker and Prabhakar Kolte

5.1 A Study of the Abstract Forms in K.C.S Paniker’s “Words and Symbols” Series

K.C.S. Paniker is one of the most unique and significant artists concerning abstraction. His most famous series of work and from which he also gained a crucial recognition as an abstract artist is his *Words and Symbols* series around the 70s. In these series of work, one can notice that it is made up of scripts and symbols as the name of the series also suggest [Plate 3.1, Plate 3.2, and Plate 3.3].

Paniker’s works highlights on the question of scientific knowledge and the discovery that follows it to concede the profound correlation between India’s zeal for modernity and it’s colonially constructed past. Paniker emerged as a central figure in the Madras art scene. He did not rose from the crucible of Bombay’s post-independence milieu but from the distant state of Tamil Nadu, where he and his colleagues had temporarily experimented with the dialects of post-impressionism before Paniker shifted the visual landscape in his *Words and Symbols* series [324].

Paniker mentions his series of influences on his work from Ravi Varma, Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, and the fauves among others. He states he used be under the influence of many such figures simultaneously. However, during the early 50s, he began to feel dissatisfied with the Western influence which had been his mainstay till that point in his oeuvre. From 1953 to 63, he was under the influence of a mixture of Ajanta and Van Gogh. He was fully aware of the fact that unless one was able to grasp and absorb

the fundamentals of Western modern art, it would be impossible to contribute anything worthwhile to the art of his own country. He used to hear a lot about Paul Klee even then. Paul Klee was profoundly influenced by Egyptian pictures and hieroglyphs, and it was Klee who roused plenty of hope in Paniker. Furthermore, Paniker mentions that Klee is closer to their art than Picasso or Braque [325].

Even before his venture into pure abstraction with *Words and Symbols*, Paniker's profound influences from the leading figures of Western modern art such as Gauguin, Matisse, Van Gogh and the Fauves, whose primary concern was with color and abstracted forms makes it necessary to analyze his work from the perspective of the Western aesthetic views and art theories as well. Also, if one observe the works of Klee such as *Am Nil (On the Nile)* [Plate 3.4], it can be seen that he has clear influences from Egyptians hieroglyphs and pictures. The simplified stick figures along with scripts such as in Egyptian temples are reminiscent in the work of Klee as well as Paniker [Plate 3.5].

In an era in which internationalism provided the key to the modern, Paniker refused to abandon his connection to India. However, at the same time, he avoided the common misstep of venturing too deeply into a national centered idiom. His *Words and Symbols* series makes use of oil colors for layering to render the surface with a rough, antique quality look on the works [Plate 3.6]. Even in reproduction, Paniker's paintings retain the look and feel of antiquity to them. The discolored quality of the canvas bestows the works a feeling of organic decay associated with the ancient. Paniker stayed away from the usage of older Indian media such as tempera and watercolor, which were used widely by the nationalist Bengal school of the pre-independence era, to regain oil color as medium not exclusively for Western work [326].

It seems that Paniker, even though, he is well aware of the international traditions of art and influences from the West during his time, he was also conscious of the beauty of his own country's indigenous visuals such as that of the decaying old parchments of ancient texts which reflected to him the significance of his own country's culture and teachings. However, for him, it seems the usage of such visuals was not a deliberate means to voice a nationalist revival for the 20th century Indian art scenario, but rather an interest in the aesthetic qualities of the ancient texts and scripts.

When one observes his works, it is found that on the surface of his canvas, there is an exotic indecipherable language, mathematical diagrams, primitive outline sketches of

animals and humans, along with long text blocks which are reminiscent of a genius scientist's notations on the blackboard just before a great breakthrough. All of these components gesture toward the mysteries of genius, the development of scientific knowledge, and the scholarly study of the Orient found in the translations of ancient texts in unfamiliar scripts [327]. Even though he has made use of human and animal figures in some of his works, it is not an attempt at the crude imitation of the physical world but rather an engrossment with the formal properties of the distorted figures which supposedly provides a diagrammatic aid to the indecipherable texts. These characteristics could be observed in his works such as *Drummer* [Plate 3.7].

Paniker's usage of mathematical symbols such as zero and the infinity sign in his works, thus point both towards an Indian past as well as to the universalizing movement of the modern. In numerous of his *Words and Symbols* paintings, Paniker makes use of thin vertical and horizontal lines to cordon off space on the surface of the canvas, filling it with illegible notes [328].

Each element in the painting contains a different weight and carries different emphasis, and much happens in these illegible notations. Many scholars have analyzed Paniker's work through his interest in folk art along with his founding of the Cholamandal Artists' Village and his valorization of indigenous craft and tradition. This observation can be found in the *Words and Symbols* series. However, along with folk elements, which include references of Warli art and in some ways more prominently, Paniker makes use of diagrams, charts and symbols in order to create a floating space of mathematical and scientific investigation in the framework of his primitive, folk canvases [Plate 3.8 and Plate 3.9]. The viewer comes upon the mathematics and the scribbles on the journey to a scientific discovery; however, the works permits the spectator, to neither take part in this discovery nor to comprehend it. The paintings direct the spectators as voyeurs, and henceforth unwinds the curtains to creative thought just enough for the spectators to see it happening. However, the conclusions remain ambiguous. The paintings do not divulge the mathematician's proof or permits the spectator to take part in the benefits of the scientist's discovery [329].

Words and Symbols obscure the conclusion for the viewer in many ways. The most apparent is a lack of clarity in the texts. The written scripts on his canvases are universally illegible. His writing does not pertain to any identifiable historical or esoteric

past. It is merely the *semblance of writing*, a representation of communication through text rather than communication itself. *Words and Symbols* present science as concealment, another inscrutable language inaccessible to his viewers [330].

Analyzing these several factors that constitute his works, it is observed that Paniker's interest is significantly towards the visual aspects of the forms in the ancient texts and mathematical symbols. The illegibility of the texts confirms that his intention was never to communicate an idea or to represent a narrative of certain historical past that are in anyway religious, political, social or nationalistcentric. His fascination with mathematical symbols such as the 'zero' and 'infinity' further reveals his interest in a universal language which does not limits itself to one particular culture. Such fascination with the universality of mathematics can also be found in the works of Western artists such as Mondrian, whose geometrical abstract works made of grids and boxes were a representation of the underlying mathematical principles of the universe. Furthermore, the paintings do not seek the benefits that actual charts of a scientific discovery or a mathematical equation does. Thus, Paniker's interest leans towards a disinterested appeal solely towards the aesthetic properties of the ancient texts and mathematical symbols. Furthermore, since it is already established that his usage of such scripts is not nationalist centered like the Bengal school artists, it is clear that he does not specifically have any social or political agendas propagated through his artwork. His approach corresponds to the theories of art being autonomously existing as an end in itself, finding beauty in its own independent existence which makes it significantly profound as observed in a formalist sphere.

In an article from 1979, Paniker states,

What more suitable medium can one invent for making pictures than the written words? The Chinese and the Japanese have demonstrated it to the satisfaction of the world. In India the Tantric tradition enjoins the use of the written word, symbols, figures and that the most marvelous of all inventions, the tabular column for picture making. Color is used to put the message across effectively. The Kalamkari painters of India, especially those of Andhra and the other Southern States paint their cotton temple hangings depicting the heroes of the epics; the legends are always interspersed with the figures, written with great calligraphic freedom. The drawings and symbols used also share this calligraphy quality. [331]

His interest in calligraphy also justifies his interest in the formal beauty of written words and the purely aesthetic appeal of scripts instead of their inner meanings and content which conveys thoughts and other external purposes.

While finding his magnum opus with the *Words and Symbols* series, Paniker states that, one day he happened to notice a page from the maths notebook of a young student. Arabic figures, Latin and other symbols of Algebra and other mathematical linear formations of Geometry, all aided to rouse in him a new idea. He had been familiar with these before in past, but only as a student of Maths. However, now these ushered in a vista of creative art for him. As his interest turned more and more into traditional Indian symbols and geometrical charts, he began to abandon the Roman letters which he had used in the beginning and started to adopt the Malayalam script which was more acceptable to him [332].

His latter emphasis on Malayalam script also retains his identity as an Indian artist. The usage of Malayalam scripts keeps his work grounded to the Indian soil even though it is not meant to be read and to convey any inner message related to their culture.

Paniker also states about the formal properties and symbols that were presented in his works. He states,

It was much later that I came across Tantric art. Somehow, these failed to have any impact on my creative impulse. The symbols which I use now are not symbols of anything in particular. Even most of the alphabets are those fashioned by me. Malayalam script only, very partially, as Malayalam letters. Mostly these are indecipherable signs which resemble letters. I have used these only to provide visual effects to the picture. [333]

According his above statement, It seems that his lack of interest in tantric art and imagery may due to the fact that tantric symbols and diagrams are too symbolic and comes with their own inner functional qualities rather than their aesthetic properties. This may be true for scripts and words also, which are meant to be read and understood. However, his introduction of self-fashioned illegible symbols within the texts retains his interest in the aesthetic properties of the script. He further states,

My work has little to do with Tantric art though I am visually aware somewhat of its form. My pictures are just a contemporary expression. The scripts are not

intended to be read. To make them illegible I introduced strange shapes and characters in between the group of letters. The symbols and diagrams, the tabular columns etc, have no meaning whatsoever other than their visual aspect and the images born out of association of ideas. [334]

Paniker also further states,

A country like India with its recent past and disturbed present had to absorb the lesson of the West or world art to arrive anywhere. Naturally, all our art of today has something of the stamp of the West, either less or more. It is mainly and fundamentally in the idea of the easel picture which is largely a Western concept, and the popular media of art of today. [335]

According to Leonard Brooks, abstraction is that approach in which the art do not recall reality irrespective of whether that reality is the point from which the artist started or not. It further states that abstract painting is the avoidance of representation of any sort even if they are accidental or the portrayal of any kind of subject at all. The colors, patterns and textures exist as it is and are an end in itself, not depending on any external reality [336].

Paniker's approach to abstraction grants the forms and structures in his painting complete liberty from any sort of representation, extraneous function and purpose. Such emphases on pure forms were also observed in works of artists such as Malevich in which the forms exist completely as an end in itself. Although emphasis on the formal aspects such as structures and color were also observed with artists such as Cezanne, it is only with pure abstract artists such as Paniker that one can observe a complete liberation from any sort of representation. Although, the forms were derived from actual scripts such as Malayalam, its illegibility liberates it from any sort of content.

5.2 Nature of Abstraction in the Pure colors of Prabhakar Kolte

PrabhakarKolte is another one of the most prominent abstractionist figure in the post-independence Indian art scene hailing from Maharashtra. He was also influenced by Modern Western artists such as Paul Klee. Kolte's huge canvases were filled with vast swatches of a single colour and patches of contrasting colors. Kolte had a formalist approach to abstraction and he has always avoided putting in contents and meaning or hidden emotions into his work. He has always given primary importance to the formal

qualities of the work and was fascinated by the colors and their rhythms. During his interview on the show ‘Art Talk’ with Jujhar Singh, he himself had also mentioned his emphasis on forms rather than meanings and emotive contents [337].

Regarding the emphases on forms and contents in Kolte’s work, a similar pattern between him and Paniker could be observed. Both of these artists have paid special attention to the formal compositions of color and pattern. While Paniker achieved this with indecipherable and illegible scripts and symbols, Kolte has made use mainly of large swashes of color which are fully abstracted and non-representational of anything other than itself. The independent existence of freely existing forms could be observed in many of his untitled works [Plate 3.10, Plate 3.11 and Plate 3.12].

Kolte feels that art should be admired and not deciphered. In a publishing by The New Indian Express on the December of 2021, it is mentioned that even the idea of viewers asking him the meaning behind his work does not appeal to him. In his exhibition titled ‘The Mind’s Eye, he further states,

A painting is a painting. Abstraction is a nomenclature because there’s a particular way you can identify it. You can identify lines, forms and colors, but can’t find any meaning. And I always say art has no meaning. When you see something beautiful, you don’t find meaning but just see it. Art is just like that. [338]

For Kolte, art is a form of expression and he further states, “Expression comes from within and not from outside. The canvas is blank, it’s always something within that needs to be shown on it. And often, you can’t interpret it to someone else.” [339]

Kolte’s approach makes the theory of mimesis and representation or selective representation of the ideal completely obsolete. There is no attempt to recreate anything that nature has already created whether it be sensuous elements of nature such as human figures, animal figures and landscapes or even the super-sensuous elements such as feelings of pain, anger, humor, etc. which was much prevalent in much of Western art before the advent of modernism. Rather, the form seems to be a manifestation of his innermost quest for freedom of creation just as nature creates. However, besides the usage of pure forms, Kolte seems to be more spiritually involved with with his inner intuition more than Paniker.

Kandinsky stands out as Kolte's favourite figure, being among the founders of modern art. And, similar to Kandinsky, Kolte's most significant pursuit lies his exploration of unknown realms of space and color which embodies the personal as well as spiritual dimension in art. Kolte's collection of abstracts takes the viewer through a journey of the nether world, mysteriously drifting without boundaries or limitations reminiscent of nimbus skies and clouds floating [340].

Kolte's ventures in such unknown realms made of color and patterns are also reminiscent of Klee's work whose usage of geometric forms and bright colors are characteristic of a child's drawing as can be seen his work such as *Castle and Sun*. A similar characteristic of contemplation with one own intuitive thoughts, ideas and imagination could be observed in Kolte's work [Plate 3.13 and Plate 3.14].

In an era where expression was considered more significant than means, in a generation more focused on the human figure, Kolte realized that the figurative domain in art did not satisfy his need. He yearned for a journey that express his own world and experiences, a journey that would manifest the surfaces he loved to reflect. Conjoining numerous fluid geometrical shapes with carefully diversified color fields and dense surface effect, his early abstracts expound an invincible ability to administer a powerful sense of tension and force between autonomous, yet interrelated, color fields [341].

Taking elements from his own examination and analysis on the co-relationships between form and color, combined with substantial readings of perceptual poetry and literature both in Marathi and English, along with art theory from the 20th and 21st centuries, Kolte descended into his own practice [342].

Kolte's canvases demonstrate the continued significance of intuition, while he discusses the significance of comprehending the fundamental rules of form, line and shape, he acknowledge the gospel truth of Kandinsky when he said that, art is never produced by the head alone and that art world is aware of many paintings that stem entirely from the artist's heart. In general, the ideal equilibrium between the head (conscious moment) and the heart (unconscious moment-intuition) is a law of creation, a law as old as humanity [343].

For Kolte, acrylics on canvas are all about the exploration of freedom. By means of playful arrangement of colors and shapes, Kolte is able to freeze his subject, confining its kinetic energy and permeating the works with a sense of fierce mobility [344]. Such

dynamism could be observed in his untitled works [Plate 3.15, Plate 3.16, Plate 3.17 and Plate 3.18].

A piece of art reaches its true potential meaning when it defies all standards, methods, rules and regulations and speaks to the mind autonomously. The spectator might be dependent on aesthetics but an artwork does not, because it is a personification of its own blissful qualities that transcend beyond all aesthetic theories. It is the spectator who imposes theory on the artwork and limits the process of experiencing it by trying to comprehend it. But an artwork neither accepts nor opposes such theories, nor do they restrict the expression that simply stands before the viewer, continuously stimulating as pure vision. It submits itself of all that it possesses to the spectator and still remains self-sufficient. The viewer's mind nourished in the presence of such an artwork that fills his mind with an unfiltered joy. When the viewer witnesses such a balanced perception of his whole existence, he begins to exist naturally- effortlessly. Only in such effortlessness, the viewer experience Satya (truth), Shiva (Holiness), and Sundara (beauty) in its pure form. All that remains now is the viewer spending time persistently in the company and solace of pure art [345].

Observing the many factors and characteristics that govern Kolte's work, the autonomous nature of his work is cohesive with Kant's theory of appreciating an object of beauty in the *Critique of Judgment* as disinterested pleasure. Devoid of any rules, regulations and methods, it does not serve any social and moral obligations. There is no doubt that Kolte has given much emphasis on the formal play of color and patterns, but still it is hard to perceive it solely from a formalist perspective alone. For him, much like his Western counterparts such as Kandinsky, his endeavor seems to be the venture and search for the higher underlying truths of the phenomenal world. A kind of beauty and revelation which is concealed in nature. The Hegelian notion of placing the forms in art higher and more real than that of the forms in nature could be observed when one studies the work of such abstract artists, even though Hegel was way ahead of their time. Such views also find identification with Coomaraswamy's principles where nature remains as a veil, not a revelation and by extent art is a manifestation of what lies beyond that.

Like many post-independence Indian artists, Kolte was significantly influenced by Klee's paintings and profound philosophy. Kolte quotes Klee as such, "It is extremely essential for an artist to be in constant conversation with nature, for an artist is first a

human being. He is a branch of nature. He is nature.” Kolte further states that Klee’s warning against imitating nature were as vehement as his encouragement of following it. He would propagate that, for one to be able to create the way nature did, one must discover nature within oneself. Kolte was in complete accordance with this principle, and became a follower of nature. Whatever he sensed and understood assured him that Nature created first and then looked. Nature may have improved on her own, but she never imitated anyone [346].

In accordance with this, Kolte states,

I tried to do the same. Nature created with light, water, wind, earth, ether; I took dot, line, colour, texture, form and tried to create my own pictorial world. A creative source in me began to give form to the formless, abstract concepts. At this point, I found and developed my natural tendency to ‘paint and see’, rather than ‘see and paint’- like a mother. She must first give birth to her baby; only then can she see it. I began repeatedly experiencing the active presence of this creative ‘mother’ within me. Thereon I have travelled only towards ‘pure painting.’ [347]

As a resultant of this, today Kolte confidently states that “a painting is nothing but a painting. It stems, not from, but to reality. I manifest from the nullity to being. It is not an imitation or representation of reality, but a manifestation of reality.” [348]

According to Andrew Graham-Dixon, abstract art is defined as art without subject matter, which was the revolutionary concept of the early 20th century. Identifiable objects and people are replaced by floating shapes, some of which resembled some kind of creature, and others which were geometric. The biggest leap was removing any reference to the world of identifiable objects. The abstract artists wanted to break through the self-limiting material values that they felt dominated society with a new, insightful set of spiritual principles. These artists wanted to perform the impossible by leaping into the future and creating a style of art that was on par with any art done in the past, each of the pieces containing their own inner universe. Their approach to creativity leaned towards ancient philosophy, esoteric Eastern beliefs and mystical writings. They sought their art to offer the viewer a rationale for an ordered, spirit enhancing life [349].

Kolte’s approach to abstraction and his identification with nature and how nature creates her forms reflects his own interests and venture into the spiritual in art. Unlike Paniker, whose interest was solely on the formal properties of scripts and symbols,

Kolte's abstracts has more to do with what Coomaraswamy calls the "inwardization" of the visual images which bears the mark of spiritual discovery. As Coomaraswamy also states that the artist seeing the image through his mind's eye and to manifest it in solid form through line and color is much relevant in this context. When one strips away the physical form that constitutes the phenomenal world, all that is left is the essence of the things, the spirit. And to solidify such abstract vision and concept in concrete form, the artist is now left with only freely existing colors and patterns which exist wholly independent and pure.

Plates

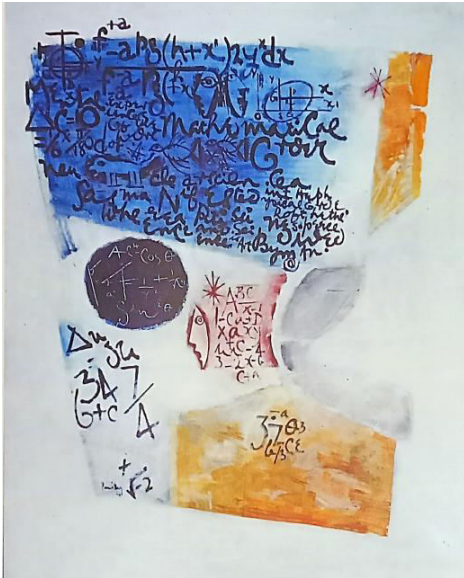


Plate 5.1: Words and Symbols, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on board, 1964, (122*96.5 cm).

Image Source: Artworld

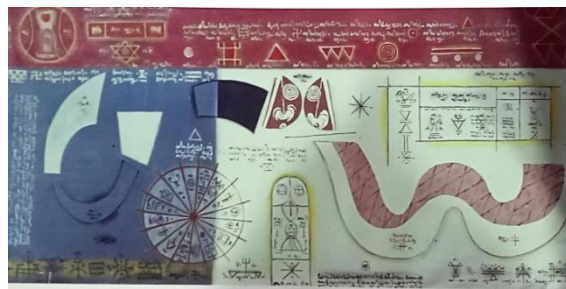


Plate 5.2: Mathematical Order in Astrology, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1971, (172.7*89 cm).

Image Source: Artworld



Plate 5.3: Words and Symbols, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1970, (129.5*119.3 cm).

Image Source: Artworld



Plate 5.4: Am Nil (On the Nile), Paul Klee, paint with glue on paper mounted on burlap, 1939, (75*125 cm).

Image Source: mcba.ch



Plate 5.5: Snake as Deity, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1971, (182.8*144.7 cm).

Image Source: Artworld

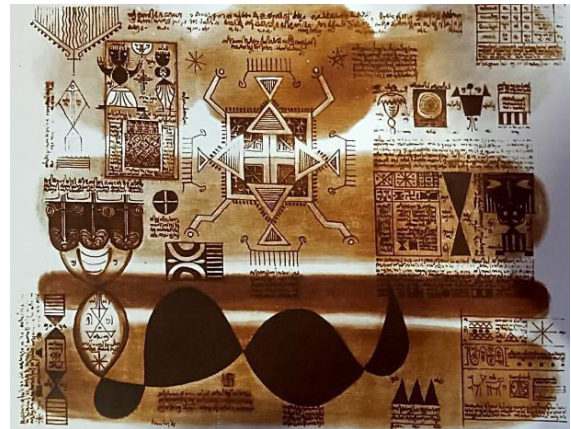


Plate 5.6: Words and Symbols, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1963, (167.6*152.4 cm).

Image Source: Artworld

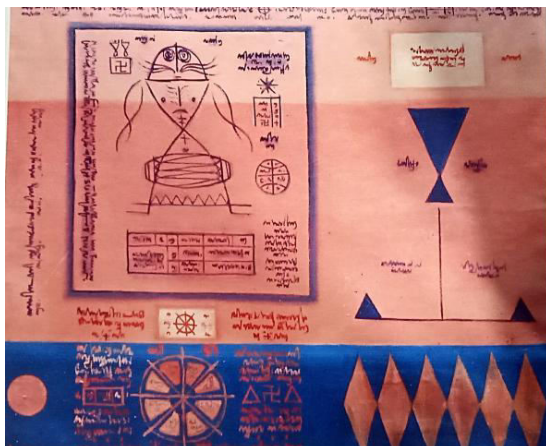


Plate 5.7: Drummer, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1965, (73.6*63.5 cm).

Image Source: Artworld

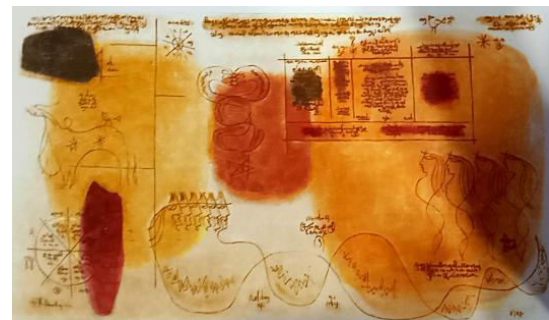


Plate 5.8: Words and Symbols, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1964, (122*63.5 cm).

Image Source: Artworld



Plate 5.9: Man, K.C.S. Paniker, oil on canvas, 1974, (111.7*89 cm).

Image Source: Artworld



Plate 5.10: Seher, Prabhakar Kolte, oil on canvas, 1999, (91.4*122 cm).

Image Source: artnet.com

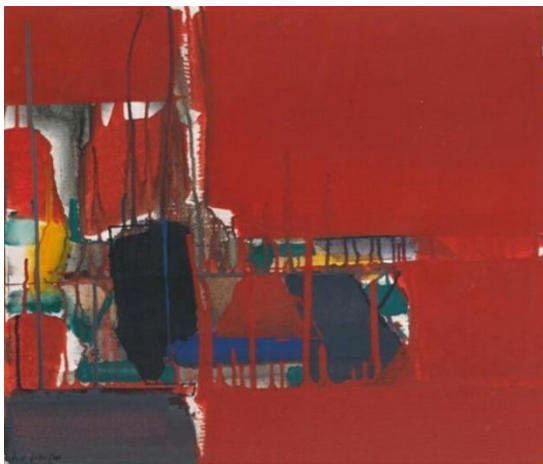


Plate 5.11: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, oil on board, 2004, (48*58.4 cm).

Image Source: artnet.com



Plate 5.12: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, acrylic on canvas, 2005, (75*90.3 cm).

Image Source: artnet.com



Plate 5.13: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, mixed media on paper, 2020, (50.8*60.9 cm).

Image Source: Treasure Art Gallery

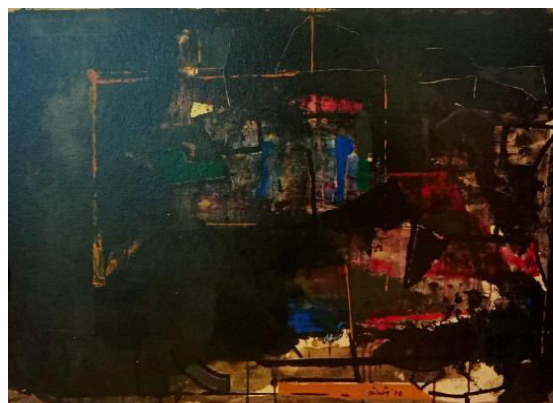


Plate 5.14: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, mixed media on paper, 2020, (55.8*83.8 cm).

Image Source: Treasure Art Gallery

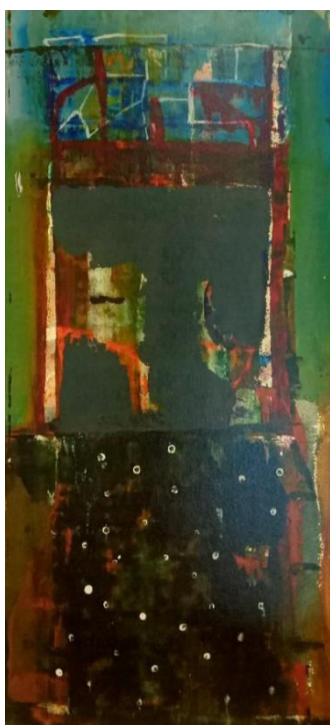


Plate 5.15: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, mixed media on paper, 2020, (55.8*27.9 cm).

Image Source: Treasure Art Gallery



Plate 5.16: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, mixed media on paper, 2020, (55.8*26.6 cm).

Image Source: Treasure Art Gallery



Plate 5.17: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, mixed media on paper, 2020, (30.4*48.2 cm).

Image Source: Treasure Art Gallery

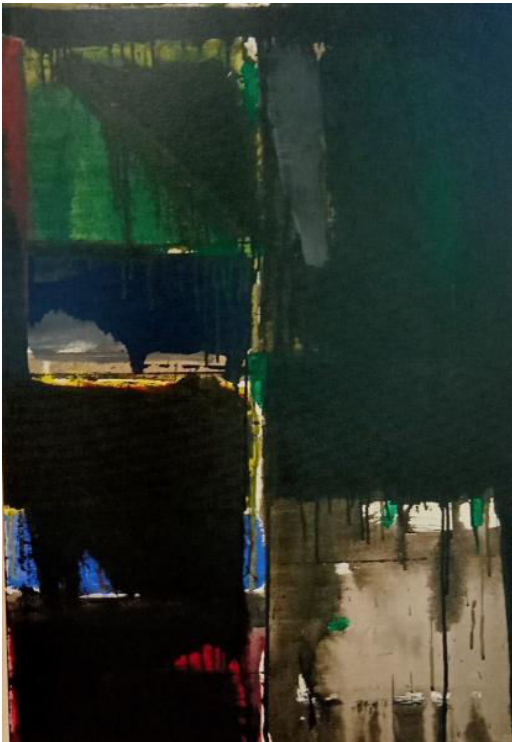


Plate 5.18: Untitled, Prabhakar Kolte, mixed media on paper, 2020, (91.4*60.9 cm).

Image Source: Treasure Art Gallery