

Anju Dodiya

Artist

'A painting is like a person. it has a life of its own'

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Artist Anju Dodiya believes that one is not fully in control during the creation of art, other forces are at work.

What does the word spirituality mean to you?

This word really matters to me. It represents some sense of purity and a quest - a quest for the pure. It is about the possibility of entering a beautiful and pure area where I am one with things, whether work, a person, or the world around.

Because of the kind of life we lead, we easily fall into cynicism, carrying a weight and a gravity in our day to day living. And somehow we lose the possibility of the spiritual, of being connected to a pure inner world, to the whole universe, to something that unites us all. The spiritual is what connects me to the world, to everyone else, in a very pure and beautiful way. The reminders that this exists do not come in huge events or giant flashes.

One can see them in everyday's things - a freshly watered garden, a couple of birds coming every day to my window. I used to think all this is sentimental but now I don't. I just feel we underestimate those simple realities. Take food for instance - the meals cooked every day by a mother, the rhythm in the kitchen, the joy of serving, the care a mother has.

It is about love, and it is so beautiful. These simple gestures are like rituals. They are so important and we should not underestimate them. It is very easy to miss it because we always look for the greater moments.

Another example of it would be coming to my studio and just being quiet here, thinking of an image, looking at the white of the paper, going through the entire ritual: first there is nothing, then there is

something, then that something envelops me, I become completely engrossed in it as if it were the entire world, as if it were a life and death situation. I get more and more entangled in it and then suddenly the knots open, I find a way out, and it is done.

That whole journey is so surprising. And then I stand back and tell myself it is just a game.

The level of intensity and involvement is of life and death, there is so much pain, so much joy in it, but actually it is only a game, a creative game!

How does the creative process start?

You may think it starts because one wants or envisions something. But in reality, a painting has its own life - like a human being it develops its character over time, and pulls you a lot.

You start with something, it then takes you elsewhere. You build a relationship. You can't just sit on top of it, you are not completely in control. Other forces are also at work. And it surprises you. That is what is wonderful about creativity.

What are those other forces?

Of course there is your training, and things like intention etc. But there also is the unconscious, constantly throwing things. I am often asked why there is so much pain in my work. And I cannot answer beyond a point. It just comes from somewhere, it takes me to that sort of content. Of course I could resist. But why would I do so? I gradually understand and accept whatever comes up.

Did you have a religious upbringing?

I wouldn't say there was much religiosity. But it definitely was like a hum in the background. My family believes in Srinathji and we would go regularly to the temple in Rajasthan. But I cannot say I gained from that relationship, I've always been curious about people getting energy from it, but personally I am not really into that sort of worship.

How come?

I developed a bit of resistance over the years, starting to question things. Religious practices and rituals didn't attract me so much. Then I stumbled upon texts like Ramakrishna's, which really interested me and helped me develop my own understanding of things - for instance when he talks about a simple purity, about moderation, about a certain detachment. It gave me some kind of a spiritual direction, especially the idea of an involvement at a higher state of mind. And I would always take it to painting - I could go on with life and various desires, but my whole involvement should be with my own processes, because creating is the ultimate for me, it is the process I live for.

Later I read "Speaking of Siva", Ramanujan's translation of the great bhakti poets of the South. I found that bhakti, that devotion so inspiring. Immediately I would connect it to my own work - a kind of frenzy, an absolute and wild quest, a singular thirst, all directed into my own art. It somehow helped me develop as a person and gave me a clarity about what life is all about. There was no room left for things like envy or pride. All those things have to go away. Because when you connect with that quest you feel washed out, so clean, so humbled, the whole difficulty of it constantly overlapping with the strong desire of it happening.

I should also add that a particular health condition shaped my life and my understanding of things in a special way. From the age of 14, I suffered from vitiligo, a skin condition that causes loss of color on patches of skin. From brown I became white over the years.

Obviously it was difficult, and as a teenager, I didn't fit in the crowd. But it also was a gift. I had fantastic parents and friends, so I was never made to feel it was taking away from my life. And it made me aware of other things to aspire for, beyond the skin, beyond the body, beyond that façade. It made me stronger and more aware of the inner energies one can work with, unrelated to the way we look. It also gave me a more acute sense of compassion. On the overall, I would say that this kind of condition changes your life, and gives you a different sense of values.

How did you become clear that art would be your way?

Growing up I enjoyed all sorts of creative activities like painting, writing etc. But mine was a very traditional, conservative business family. Girls were supposed to get married quickly after finishing school. Yet I knew I didn't want to go that way and was quite stubborn. I thought I had to be financially independent to resist this sort of family life. And of course the only thing I could do was to study business. So I did commerce for two years, and I was finished, it was terrible. It was the most depressing time of my life. That is when I realized very clearly that I needed to go to the JJ School of Arts. Once I joined, within three months, I knew it would be painting. And it would be for life. I had found myself. And it was such a happy discovery.

Creativity is like a game - imagine children and the purity of just playing, in the moment, with no before or after. I found it in painting, and it felt so meaningful.

Later, luckily, I also managed to make a living out of it, which definitely helped, because there could be a steady rhythm to it, without the anxiety of finding other ways of earning money.

In the process of creation, do you feel at times as a conduit for something else, beyond you?

Even after so many years of doing it, I am surprised how helpless I feel in that process. At the beginning, I am usually actually afraid. And I feel I have no choice about the direction I am to take. I just let it be and it decides on its own. It just happens. It unfolds. Conduit sounds somehow more noble – for me, I feel it is more some sort of a flow which takes place, despite or beyond my will or control.

What about God, is there such a thing for you?

Yes, there is some sort of a power I believe in, quite formless, large, and mysterious. I find a wonderful order to things around me.

In what way does this order affect your life, is life orchestrated by it?

Yes, I think there is a certain sense of plan beyond me. Reading the Gita etc., I really believe we have to do our work, yet never forget we are part of something larger, we must remain humble and understand we can only do this much.

But when you see or experience suffering, don't you revolt against that order?

It is not easy. But I try to take it as part of the order, of what is meant to be. I have to trust the universe.

I like reading Japanese death poetry – a tradition started by Zen monks then adopted by others to leave a few lines on one's deathbed, often the essence of one's life. We take ourselves so seriously. And at the end of the day we are so small, so nothing ...

Your creations – it is the meaning of your life, but how important is the impact they have on others?

It is very important. While in the process of creating I really do not think about it at all. It is a completely singular process in which I forget myself and I forget the viewer, in which I am only there to solve a problem.

But once I have struggled with an image and it is done, once it leaves the studio, it matters to me that people would react, it matters to me that it would touch them in some way, resonate, trigger thoughts or emotions somehow somewhere – instead of just going into a void. Of course there are times when nobody reacts. But that is part of being an artist -exposing oneself, taking a risk. And it would never stop me from creating, I just go on.

At times of major challenges, where is your anchor, your energy?

In prayer, and in the studio of course. I become unwell if I don't come to the studio. After a while everything starts disintegrating if I don't come here. I can't focus, I can't read, I become bad tempered. It is a need which has to be fulfilled.

What about prayer?

My father suddenly died when I was 30. He was only 56 and one afternoon he was gone, without a single warning. The unpredictability of life hit me so hard. And the terrible fear that comes with it. Anything can suddenly be messed up.

After that, my mother fell seriously ill for ten years. That is when I started praying. It was like a physical device to keep my anxiety away. I found it was a wonderful way to blank myself out – me, myself and my own worries, like a pure plane where I could come out of myself.

If there were such a thing as rebirth, what would you choose?

I don't really believe in it. But I guess I would like to come back as a harmless animal, a startled deer. It sounds suitably innocent and pure. Even though of course I guess the real life of deers must be very different!

What is your idea of happiness?

The best is when I forget myself. It can be a breeze on a summer's day, or seeing an unexpected flower in my garden, or above everything, working well – then, it is such a complete satiation, everything is well with the world, with a sense of order and resolution.

It may not last for very long, but in those moments, I feel complete happiness, complete stillness.

