

Bharti Kher

Artist

'I need angst to create'

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Artist Bharti Kher talks about what spirituality means to her.

What does spirituality mean to you?

It's about finding myself, and finding peace in myself. So I would say I am a deeply spiritual person in my studio. Because in it, I am always looking for some way - an image, the slight of hand or anything that would communicate something not of this earth, that could be tuned into.

Spirituality is definitely not about God. I do not believe in the idea of a greater power. A whale has got as much power as a human being. I don't default to a patriarchal, hierarchical, traditional thought of a pyramid structure where there is somebody at the top. I think it's much more cyclical.

You never had such a belief?

When you grow up, it's something you may have as a crutch. When you are stuck, or wishing for something you pray to God. In reality, you are talking to yourself. Talking to God is actually a dialogue with yourself. And it saves you from disturbing others.

But regardless, I find religions immensely interesting. Among others because I am fascinated by numerology. I always wondered why the number three is so important in so many traditions. I often make triptychs and people ask me why. And I don't know! You have one, two, and the other. 'The

other' is infinitely more interesting than the two others. One and two can't be whole without the third. The idea of the in-between is something I am very interested in.

So I find it all fascinating. And it's not that to me, there is nothing there. It's just that I don't believe in the idea that once I die, God will punish me for not eating my peas.

Was your upbringing religious at all?

My mother is a believer in Sikhism and prays every day. She believes in everybody being equal and more than anything else, she taught us that. At the same time we were growing up in England, going to church at school, singing hymns, reading the Bible.

Did you believe in it?

No. But for me it was a narrative. And I always have been fascinated by narratives.

I have always been interested in the idea of faith. And how people instill value in an object, rendering it sacred – whether milk, or a stone, or a tree.

It's really exciting as an artist, because it means that I also have the power as an artist to transform an object, which I consistently do.

If I write on a grain of rice, does that object become more valuable because of my labor? If I stick a quarter of a million bindis on a piece of work, does that work then become more about the slight of my hand, does each bindi carry a residue of me? Is it a symbol for all the women who had worn it? Is it a memory? A bindi can become the residue of your whole day. It is like a witness to your conversation from the moment you wake up in the morning, to the moment you stick it back on the mirror. It sat with you, it talked with you, it listened to all your conversations.

I am interested in all those things.

So I guess within my practice you could call me spiritual. Because I then live for some meaning. But why are we here anyway...

Yes, that's a good question... why are we here?

I have no idea ... If you know that the earth has been alive for 4.5 billion years, constantly multi-tasking, what are we... I may think my day is hard but what about the earth's? We are so minuscule. At times yes, I do wonder, why bother? Then another side says of course you need to bother, no matter how minuscule you are. Then the third side of the trilogy says making art is like an act of folly. It's based on absolute freedom. It's based on nothing except itself.

Why do you call it a folly?

Because you don't need to make art. What is it for? I don't know... Is it a need? Is it a response to a demand? Am I just keeping myself busy to stay away from mischief? Is it a desire? Do I just need to do something with some part of my body?

Do you feel best when in the creative process?

I think so. When I look at objects, I am always looking at how I could change them from the way you think you see and perceive them. I think that's what artists do anyway. We move meaning and transform objects. Or at least that's what I do. And if I don't come to the studio, I get grouchy.

Did you always have this urge to create?

Yes, since I was a kid, I was always making things. I always liked to use my hands.

It is very important that my work be physical. It is quite primeval in many ways.

Also, I am learning to trust more my intuition.

When I make my work, it suddenly comes, I don't know from where. For instance I suddenly feel and know I should make a tree falling over, or an elephant, or I wonder, what is the largest heart in the world ? It must be a whale's ... so let me make one. I don't really think why I make it or what I am going to do with it, but somehow in the back of my brain the idea comes and seems right. And the more I think about it, the more excitement it generates. You can generate so much excitement out of yourself in your little world ! That keeps you busy, out of mischief!

You said that spirituality is about finding yourself and finding peace – is your studio the main place for it?

No. I have two kids and a husband who remind me who I am every single day ! And in any case, I am not that self-indulgent that I would spend most of the day thinking about who I am. Most of my work is not particularly autobiographical, although people tend to think so. It's a bit too easy to look at me and decide where my work has come from - for instance projecting this idea of the diaspora, of being neither from here nor from there.

People think those are self-portraits. They are not. They are not about me, they are about you. I don't witness myself. I don't really want to analyze myself every day, thank you very much. I am more interested in looking at other people. I think other human beings are far more interesting. I am just like a conduit in a way, a witness, who watches and processes, and then makes something out of it. Artists are witnesses of a time and place.

In general, I love looking at what is leftover. At the residues. The in-between spaces.

I find them more interesting than those which are more apparent. Similarly I am more interested in domestic spaces than outdoor ones. Because it speaks to me much more about time, economics, social values, people's place in the hierarchy of life, how they negotiate their small place in the world, their small corner where to stand.

Tell me more about the idea of being a conduit – do you at times feel like a conduit for something else, not knowing where a piece came from?

Definitely. I sometimes make pieces and wonder where they came from. People ask me how and why I made them. And I have no idea.

For instance, I was preparing a London show and made an eleven-armed goddess with an impaled woman and three heads. I would look at it and ask "what is she" ? At some point, I just realized what it was. And that was it. Some of the strongest works you do just come like that. You don't know from where, but they just come. Very fast.

The way life unfolds, is it all random, or is there such a thing as destiny?

I think you just make your own destiny and you make your own life. Human beings are exceptionally powerful. We just don't connect very well with ourselves. That's why faith is so crucial, faith in yourself to be able to achieve.

So you believe in yourself?

You have to. Working in your studio is very isolating. You can be on your own for weeks and months. For years it was like making crap in the studio and nobody looking at it, but I had to keep making it.

And you have to make good of your mistakes, you have to respect the rhythm of things.

If a sculpture is not talking to me for six months, it is because it is not ready to speak to me. In fact, I walk around my studio like a mad old lady, talking all the time, asking objects : "who are you? What are you going to be ? What do you want to be ?" For instance I may have the cast of a woman's body and I talk to her for six months. Every morning I tell her, "good morning, what are you going to be today ?" Then suddenly she is saying "I am going to be a woman with long horns" and within that day it starts. It takes three days, four days, and that's it, it's all done ! Then what do I do next ?

You always believed in yourself?

No. it came over time. With friends, colleagues, a few contemporaries who may say, yes, it's good. And also you realize "so what if you make a mistake? Big deal!"

How important is it for you to touch or talk to others through your work?

I do wish to share the work. I don't really know why though. What does it mean if people say it was a great show?

When you have a show, you want to know if people are responding. But it takes years for your work and images to actually filter through to people. And the most important feedback is the one you get in the studio from friends, colleagues, from people you respond to intellectually.

The art world is very small here but it's a great place, with some amazing people. You don't always see great work but when you do it's like a drug. You meet great people, you drink amazing wine and eat good food, and we laugh a lot. It releases our angst...

Why all that angst?

Artists are just like that. They are sensitive people !! (Laughs) I guess we spend too much time alone and drink too much wine. I actually can't speak for others. But at least it's true for me. Writers do to. They oscillate between complete isolation and mad, hedonistic intense times and conversations.

Plus, nobody is actually telling you that you should do it. That you should do art. You only do it because you want to. It's like a drug, it gives you a high.

And the angst gets sublimated through art?

Great art has always been made at times of great hardship. You require some edge. What I am saying is a complete cliché.

But it's hard being an artist. It's hard to make good art. It's not about what is in your brain. It's about how your brain, your eyes, your perception of space and time combine – you have one image, one fleeting moment. That image may be made of a thousand things. But with that one thing – how do you make people stop and look at it? What is it that makes you feel that a work is about to tip towards you? How do I make you feel smaller or much bigger than the work? How do I create a sense of intimacy with something the size of your hand?

That's about the form. Then there is the question of content and the idea that by now, nothing we create is really original. There are no new ideas. None of us has done something really new. I may do some work, then sit on the internet and find someone on the other side of the planet who did exactly the same thing. So all the time you have to try and find your own language.

In any case, I have to find the angst because in it I find beauty. In the tension of opposites I can find it. I have to live with angst because I can't make anything without it.

And a tension of opposites, that's also what we are. When I make those hybrid women who are fantastically ugly and scarily beautiful at the same time, they are violent and macabre, almost warrior women, but also tender and there is empathy in them. Which is what we are. We all need an armor, we need to be warrior-like and keep a part of us hidden. Otherwise we would be too vulnerable.

At times of huge challenges, where is your anchor, where is your energy coming from?

From the belly. And I sleep. At times of trouble, I need to sleep. Even for ten minutes.

That calms me. Then I can handle it.

If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

What are we doing here, running around like ants?

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

I don't want to come back. I want to be up there watching everybody. I want to be the boss. I want to come back as God!

What is your idea of happiness?

I am in a good place now – with a good family, working every day in my studio, nice friends, good wine, good conversations. Nothing too dramatic. That is my idea of a good time in Delhi.

If you'd ask me what I would really want to do though, I would want to go and live high up in the mountains. But it's never going to happen.

Why?

I would probably last there for four days and come running back to the city. I don't actually know if I can live with myself for so long, if I could bear to be with myself for too long.