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Artist explores threads of personal, collective identity

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Debesh Goswami's show "Uprooted" was held at the Lalit Kala Akademi in New Delhi from July 19 to July 25. The series of works on display revealed the influence of the Anglo-Saxon School and Art Povera on him. It is the theme of alimentation — both physical and spiritual — reigns supreme in some of his recent works and it was well illustrated by an installation entitled Bread Dome.

Goswami was born in 1965 in Kolkata and has lived in Paris since 1995. Professor at Rennes Art College (France), he has exhibited in the United States, Japan and China.

Excerpts from an interview:

Q: You had a solo show in India after quite a while. How did "Uprooted" come about?

A: The sense "uprooted" came into my mind in France (2004) and took its shape a year after in the Exhibition of Moscow at the Museum of Modern Art. It's an installation of show affixed by the roots of plant lives. It's indicative of an eternal journey, a process of continuous immigration in search of truth, an existence of human being from this mundane word to the transcendental stage. Through this work, the theme of identity, both personal and collective, I tried to negotiate myself with the reality of my existence between that of indigenous Indian culture and the world of occidental Europe in which, I personally live and the life between eternal and ephemerals.

Q: As someone who had to immigrate, do you feel any sense of rootlessness?

A. Nothing to feel so if the mission is led to an appropriate direction.

Q. What do you owe your preoccupation with body and the sources of nourishment to?

A. I use my own body as model for experiments. I wanted to show the fragile boundary between "I" and the universe, to personify this relationship (identity/space) in the performance Flexible Border (2004). I was taking off a sort of skin out of bread dough. Food is the essential base of the nourishment from which the body derives energy.

Q. What special meaning does a show in India hold for you?

A. I am basically an Indian, educated and nourished myself in the Indian culture. As I grew up and enriched myself in a wider spectrum of the global context I feel what I was missing so far. It is, therefore, very much relevant to share those experiences with the younger generations in India.

Q: You teach art in France. What is the contemporary art scene in France like?

A. In France, the meaning of contemporary art is well-defined and recognised by the great institutions, like

museums, galleries and different cultural centres and not mixed up with amateur arts. The contemporary art is both exclusive and exhaustive in varied dimensions of their expressions.

Q: What direction do you see the Indian contemporary art is heading to? Who are your own favourite artists?

A: It is too early to draw a conclusive idea about it. No doubt, the younger generations here are doing excellent works with various experiments. It is still passing through a stage of transformation and the day is probably not far when it will find a distinct turn of its own.

Q: What made you chose your medium and technique? Where do you seek inspiration from?

A: There was a great artistic movement in Italy in the '60s which is regarded as "Art Povera." It had used very simple materials like clay, wood, charcoal, brick and straw as a medium of art. Inspired by it, I found several other elements intensive study into it. In the quest of it, what thrived me most in the need for sustenance of a human being, the supply of bread and water, his body temperature and an ultimate goal of life, a journey from sensuous attachment to an existence of super sensuous mundane world.

Q: How did your passage to France helped shape what you are today? What were the hurdles that you had to undergo?

A: Before I came to France I had practically no idea about the developments that took place in the artistic movement of the European sub-continent after the '60s. France had always been the pioneer in this respect. It is the melting pot of different artistic trends and tendencies. It was, therefore, natural for me to take same time to be accustomed with the mode of such process. But I am fortunate enough to receive due guidance that I needed most at that time and to become what I am to day.

Q: What hope do you have from the GenNext of artists in your medium?

A: It depends how the ideas are conceived and the mode of their expressions since it is spread over a wider spectrum to continue.

Q: What role do you see of artists in the changing world?

A: Artists live with their creative urges. They also live with the period they belong to. It is, therefore, natural to reflect the contemporary socio-religious and political scenario in their art forms. In the changing circumstances of the world, the canvas has become wider and open in multifarious dimensions. Though it suggests some sort of restlessness, the consistency of a rich total quality and bold concept is not lost altogether and still persists.