

# Living-in-Archives: Traces, Fragments and Anecdotes on Shilu Pyari

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If archives are ‘instruments of hegemony’<sup>1</sup> serving as sites for the re/production of authority and power – which is often the case in state-sponsored institutional archives – how can anthropologists practise archival research work without reproducing or perpetuating canonised and fossilised state narratives and histories? In my research work, I look at state-sponsored art institutional spaces in Nepal to examine twentieth-century modern and contemporary art practices. While ethnographic encounters inform my anthropological inquiry, I have been interested in the question of the role of archives and archival research from the outset. In the case of Nepal, not only personal collections of individual artists but also institutional archives are in varying states of disarray and dilapidation. Working with both sets of archives have provided me with ample opportunities to reflect on the potentials as well as the problems when it comes to making meanings out of archival encounters.

In this essay, I would like to reflect and build on Stuart Hall’s conceptualisation of the ‘living archives’<sup>2</sup> as counter-archives. I process through the fieldnotes from my research work and dwell on the loss and haunting of a Nepali artist, Shilu Pyari, in order to illuminate on the incompleteness and haunting of the art historical archives. I re-examine the various archival encounters during my fieldwork to look at traces, fragments and anecdotes as valid, legitimate and at times subversive forms and acts of rewriting narratives and histories. In doing so, I also engage with an integral part of any anthropological practice: taking fieldnotes. Often, these fieldnotes are also ‘on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended’,<sup>3</sup> and filled with traces, fragments and anecdotes akin to Hall’s notion of living archives. I want to remain cognisant of my role as a researcher and an outsider to the field that I am studying. The archival turn in anthropological practice is entangled in uneven relations of power and acts of epistemic violence. The historian and anthropologist Ann Stoler comments on the impulses to treat archive-as-source to suggest re-reading archives-as-subject since they are not ‘sites of knowledge retrieval

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<sup>1</sup> See David Zeitlyn, ‘Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, vol 41, October 2012, pp 461–480

<sup>2</sup> See Stuart Hall, ‘Constituting an Archive’, *Third Text*, vol 15, no 54, Spring 2001, pp 89–92

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp 89

but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography'.<sup>4</sup> In this context, it becomes important to not replicate the very extractive and oppressive ways in which institutions give birth to archives. It becomes salient to think about living archives and the methods of engaging with living archives as a counter-hegemonic research practice.

Before delving into living archives, I would like to think through some of the elements that I associate with living archives here: traces, fragments and anecdotes. Unlike the densities of institutional archives, the unbearable lightness and ephemerality of these elements are emblematic of the fractures, fissures and fabulations that can make up living archives. I use the sociologist Avery Gordon's conceptualisation of haunting to articulate how these ghostly matters haunt not only my field encounters but also the institutional memory of Nepali art history. Gordon claims 'the ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life'.<sup>5</sup> I think of Shilu Pyari, an artist who is no longer alive and whose living archives I reckon with, as such a social figure whose loss and erasure can make visible the ideological structures and processes that render some artistic figures legible and legitimate while making others illegible and marginal. In a way, the incompleteness of the traces, fragments and anecdotes make legible the intimate and integral ways in which Shilu Pyari is part of the social life of an emergent Nepali art world in the mid-twentieth century.

18 June 2018 - Fieldnote entry

Who is Shilu Pyari?

I was not sure how to enter Shilu Pyari in my fieldnotes. She was not someone I have had the fortune of meeting in person. Initially, she existed only in anecdotal references. My first anecdotal encounter with her was during a meeting with a prominent art writer in Nepal. Pointing to a black and white image dated 1959 one of the earliest photographs of the teachers and students at the first art school of Nepal, Juddhakala Pathshala (Juddha Art School),<sup>6</sup> I remember asking who the two girls in the front row were.<sup>7</sup> This was the first time I had heard the name of Shilu Pyari. Or is it Shilupyari? What is her surname? I was intrigued by the fact that her surname remained ambiguous. Immediately, I was disheartened thinking of the near impossibility of finding her, especially since virtually everyone I met during my fieldwork had difficulty recalling details about her. I reached a point where I began to wonder if she was merely a figment of my imagination. The more I asked about Shilu Pyari, the less real she became.

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<sup>4</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial archives and the arts of governance', *Archival Science* 2, March 2002, pp 87–109

<sup>5</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2004, p 8

<sup>6</sup> Juddhakala Pathshala was established in the early 1940s under the patronage of Juddha Shumsher Rana, who belonged to the aristocratic dynasty that ruled the Kingdom of Nepal for almost two centuries

<sup>7</sup> Madan Chitrakar, *Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of a Transition*, TebaChi (TBC) Studies Centre, Kathmandu, 2004



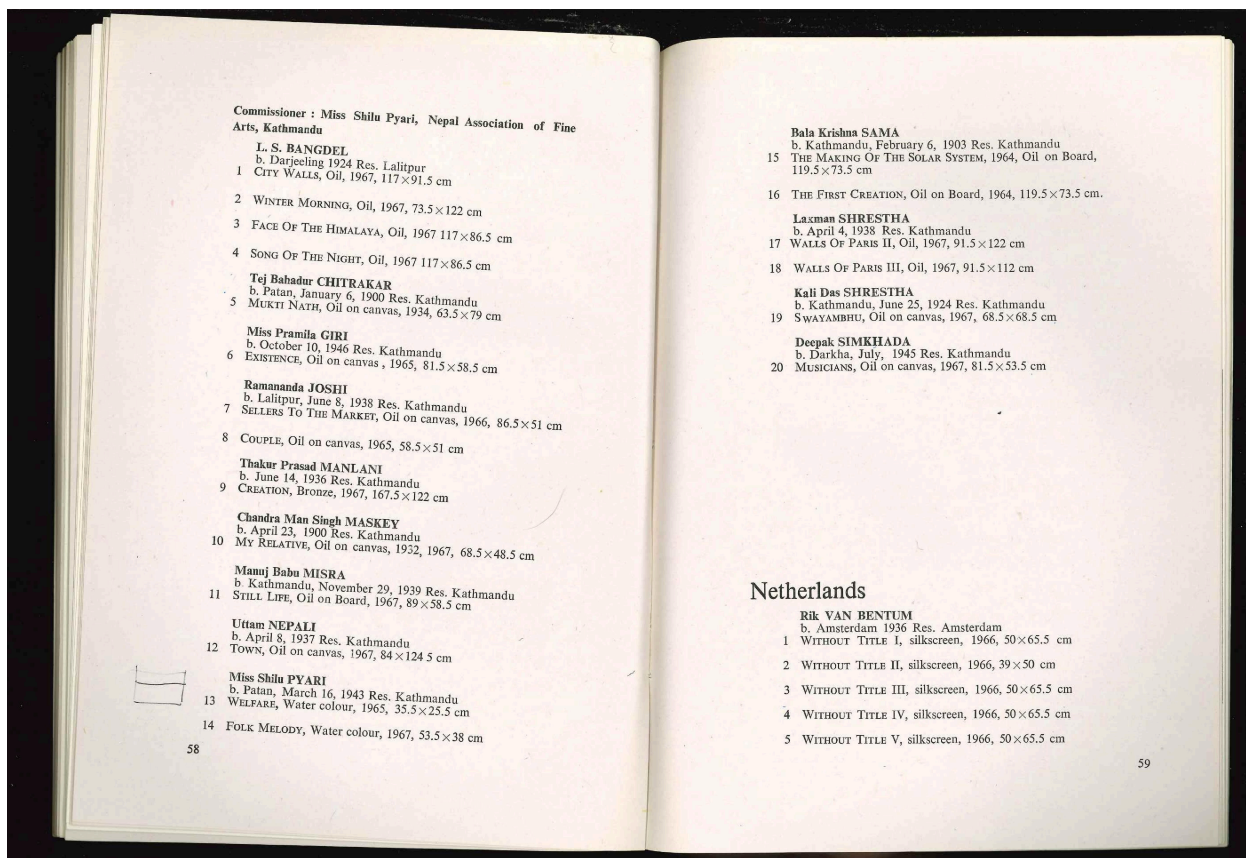
*Who is Shilu Pyari?* A group photo of teachers and students at Juddha Kala Pathshala, considered the ‘first art school’ of Nepal and established in the early 1940s; the photograph is dated 1959 and the caption includes names of the faculty members but does not mention the names of any others; photo credit: Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of Transition, courtesy of Madan Chitrakar



*How did I miss this?* A black and white photo of the executive committee members of the National Association of Fine Arts established under the royal patronage of then crown prince Birendra Shah in 1965; the photograph is dated 1969 and lists the names of the people seated, from right: Tej Bahadur Chitrakar, Shilupyari, Balkrishna Sama, Lain Singh Bangdel and C M Maskey; standing, from right: Amar Chitrakar, Pramila Giri, D B Chitrakar and Ramananda Joshi; photo credit: Tej Bahadur Chitrakar: Icon of Transition, courtesy of Madan Chitrakar



It was almost a year later that I re-encountered Shilu Pyari in various textual fragments, particularly in books and catalogues. One of these books was the very book where the black and white image from 1959 had been published. A couple of pages later was another black and white image, dated 1969, a decade later, and there in the caption was her name, 'A NAFA group photo. 1969: seated from (R) Tej Bahadur Chitrakar, Shilupyari, Balkrishna Sama, Lain Singh Bangdel and C M Maskey.'<sup>8</sup> How did I miss this? I couldn't shake the discomfort away, knowing fully that a more careful reading through the book would have resulted in finding Shilu Pyari sooner. There she was, in the front row sitting next to figures who are now considered canonical to modern Nepali art history and institutional practices. Shilupyari, dressed in a big floral saree and a black coat, is seated, rather stoic, staring right into the camera, her hands inside the pockets of her coat, unlike the men whose arms were crossed across their chest with an uncannily exact slant. There she was, all this time. And as if a floodgate of fragments had been let loose, I found her again, a couple of months later, in the pages of the catalogue to the *First Triennale India 1968*, published by Lalit Kala Akademi, India.



Commissioner: Miss Shilu Pyari. Pages 58–59 in the First Triennale India 1968 catalogue: a delegation of thirteen Nepali artists represented by the Nepal Association of Fine Arts, Kathmandu, participated and exhibited twenty artworks in the First Triennale India in 1968

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, pp 46

There it was, in bold letters: ‘Commissioner: Miss Shilu Pyari, Nepal Association of Fine Arts, Kathmandu.’<sup>9</sup> And again, in the list of participants, at the very end, was her name:

Miss Shilu PYARI

b. Patan, March 16, 1943 Res. Kathmandu

WELFARE, Water color, 1965, 35.5 x 25.5 cm

FOLK MELODY, Water color, 1967, 53.5 x 38 cm <sup>10</sup>

The group photograph of the NAFA members was taken a year after the first Triennale in India.

This prompted me to revisit and rummage through some of the books that I had come to collect during my fieldwork on Nepali art and art history. And sure enough, there she was again. This time, it was in the book *Samasamayik Nepali Chitrakalako Itihas* (History of Contemporary Nepali Paintings), authored by Narayan Bahadur Singh and published by the former Royal Nepal Academy in 1976.<sup>11</sup> A small chapter towards the very end of the book is dedicated to women artists, and the section begins with Shilu Pyari.<sup>12</sup> Singh provides a short yet detailed biographical information on Pyari.<sup>13</sup> Her father’s name is mentioned as Bekhlal Shrestha, providing us with a surname for her – however, the surname remains absent from her own name. At the early age of nine or ten, she was sent to receive education in Wardha, India. She later took a five-year-long diploma course in painting from Rajasthan University and a Master of Arts degree in economics from the same institution in 1964/65. The author goes on to discuss her art style and her institutional involvements. Singh claims that while Pyari worked with a variety of styles and mediums, the wash technique was her favourite. A year later, after completing her higher education, she joined the executive committee of the Nepal Association of Fine Arts and was also appointed the chairperson of the association after two years. Members of the association were involved in organising art exhibitions that were usually inaugurated by royal family members. Here, Shilu Pyari is standing behind former Queen Ratya Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah during the inauguration of a solo exhibition for the artist Shashi Bikram Shah. During this period, she received a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) scholarship to travel to various European countries, including France, Italy, the Netherlands and England.

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<sup>9</sup> The Nepal Association of Fine Arts was established in 1965 under the royal patronage of then Crown Prince Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev during the monarchical regime in Nepal; it was established with the notion of preserving and promoting ‘Nepali art and artists’

<sup>10</sup> Lalit Kala Akademi, First Triennale India, exhibition catalogue, 1968, pp 57–58

<sup>11</sup> Singh is considered to be one of the earliest art writers in Nepal who continuously published reviews on art shows and exhibitions in the national daily, *Gorkhapatra*. The Royal Nepal Academy was formalised by the then King Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev in 1957. The Academy was responsible for the promotion of languages, literature and culture of Nepal under the larger cultural project of instituting a national identity.

<sup>12</sup> Narayan Bahadur Singh, *Samasamayik Nepali Chitrakalako Itihas (History of Contemporary Nepali Paintings)*, Royal Nepal Academy, Kathmandu, 1976

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p 272



*And sure enough, there she was again.* Shilu Pyari, standing behind Queen Ratna Rajya Laxmi Devi Shah during the inauguration of the solo exhibition of artist Shahi Bikram Shah (standing next to the queen), organised on the occasion of the queen's 41st birthday at the National Association of Fine Arts Gallery in 1968, photo credit: Shashi Bikram Shah Collection, courtesy of Priyanka Bahadur Chand

Oftentimes, there is an aversion to a biographical treatment of an artist. But faced with this fragment of Shilu Pyari's life history, I cannot help but appreciate the many possibilities of tracing her onto the multiple timelines that I have drafted on my field diary to arrive at both the mainstream and the alternative narratives and histories of Nepali art practices. While this short biographical piece is neither an oral history nor an autobiography, it is still a critical part of the archival encounters that make up a living archive on Shilu Pyari. All these anecdotes and fragments present a myriad of possibilities in making visible the lives of artists who have been sidelined from the grand narrative of Nepali art and art history. The irrevocable loss of lives does not render the possibility of constituting a living archive unimaginable; rather, it is the persistent haunting of this irrevocable loss that animates the archive for me in the field.

However, there are dangers to these hauntings. It can easily shapeshift into desires to salvage and render figures real, without really reckoning with the broader implications of their loss. In this case, the affective registers of loss when it comes to figures such as Shilu Pyari need to be questioned as part of the uneven production of knowledge and power relations. The loss of individuals to the past (or to history) perpetuates the misconception that recuperating them from records and collections can redress this historical oversight. I am reminded of the famous rhetorical question posed by the art historian Linda Nochlin almost five decades ago: 'Why have there been no great women artists?'<sup>14</sup> The impulse to go on to list a few such great (Nepali) women artists would not only be tokenistic but would also obscure the very institutional sanctions and barriers that marginalise women artists from becoming part of both the writing

<sup>14</sup> See Linda Nochlin, 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', in Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*, Harper and Row, New York, 1988, pp 145–178

and the making of the art historical canon. In fact, the loss of Shilu Pyari is an institutional obfuscation of her artistic and institutional contributions to the Nepali art world. I do not wish to undermine the value of recuperating lost figures from the past; however, the haunting persistence of their loss carries with it a much more generative potential to contend with the institutional project of sealing the canonicity of the male-centred grand narratives of (Nepali) art history. An additive measure would only be conducive to spread the myth of women's absence or marginal presence in such a history. Being haunted by the loss and the incompleteness of such art historical archives can hold accountable the institutional amnesia and erasure of figures like Shilu Pyari.

The dates mentioned in Singh's book confirm that the girl from the first black and white image is not Shilu Pyari. Born in 1943, Shilu Pyari left for India at the age of nine or ten and did not return to Nepal until 1964. This would mean that she was in India at the time this photograph was taken. And this is where archival recuperation is dissatisfactory. Does the story end here, in having separated the speculated and 'real' Shilu Pyari? Not really. What remains is the obscurity of Shilu Pyari in the institutional narrative on Nepali art history, despite her sustained engagement in the field. Pyari has become one of the many women artists in Nepal whose personal and professional contributions in making art and steering the art institution have been elided. If one pays close attention to the traces, fragments and anecdotes that breathe life into archives by making them palpable and haunting, the myths of history come undone.

Recently, during a public event entitled 'Rethinking Nepali Art History: Women Artists in the 1960s and '70s', Shilu Pyari's name was mentioned by the son of the artist Hemendra Kumari Rana.<sup>15</sup> After being cajoled by the moderator to speak a few words about his mother and her personality, he revealed that Rana was a quiet and introverted person. And then, he said: 'She was close to few people. There was someone by the name of either Miss or Mrs Shilu Pyari. I believe she is dead.'

14 February 2021 - Fieldnote Entry

While flipping through a visitor's book from an exhibition held in 1970, I found a handwritten entry:

"Ramro cha." [Good.]  
- Hemendra Kumari Rana  
Who is Hemendra Kumari Rana?

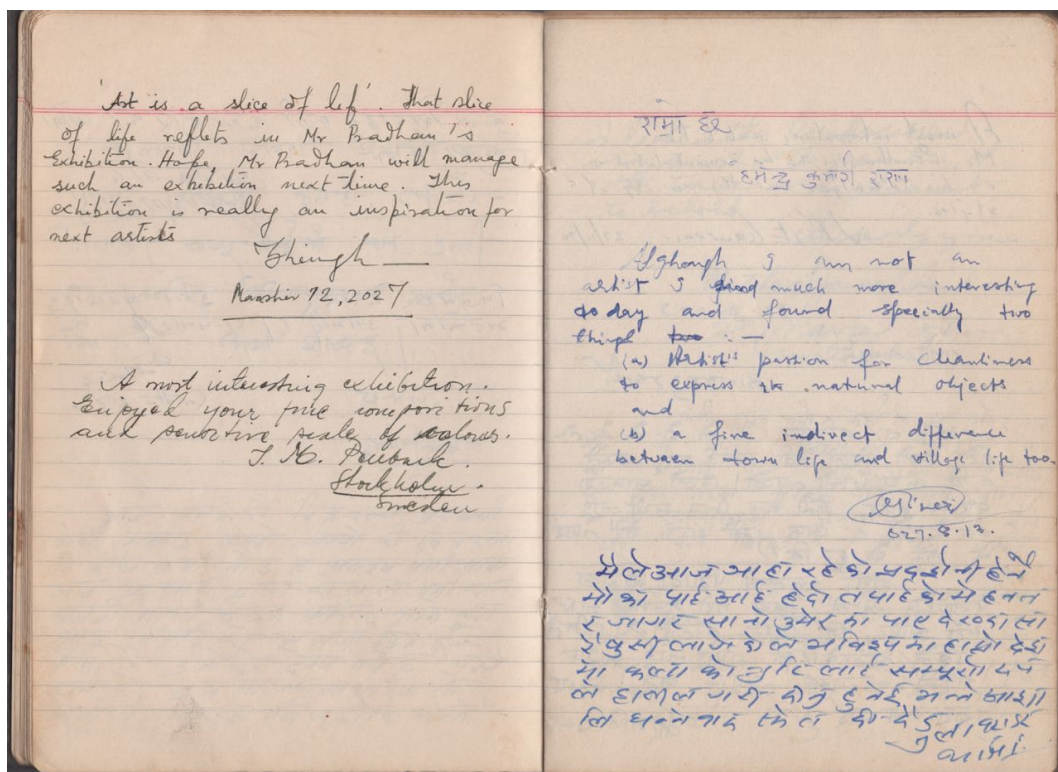
The ghost of Shilu Pyari (or Hemendra Kumari Rani) is 'a social figure and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life'.<sup>16</sup> And it is the loss and haunting of figures such as Pyari and Rana that can shed light on how institutional power and authority manifest in and operate through art historical archives.

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<sup>15</sup> See the documentation of this event on YouTube: 'Rethinking Nepali Art History: Women Artists in the 60s and 70s', last modified on 1 May 2020 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=m\\_0PXW69UIM&t=818s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m_0PXW69UIM&t=818s)

<sup>16</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, op cit, p 8





Who is Hemendra Kumari Rana? A handwritten message by the artist Hemendra Kumari Rana in a visitor's book at an exhibition organized in Kathmandu, Nepal 1970; photo credit: Basta Gopal Vaidya Collection, courtesy of Kala Kulo

## Postscript, 2022

It is impossible to describe an archive in its totality.  
The very idea of a 'living archive' contradicts this fantasy of completeness.  
As work is produced, one is, as it were, contributing to and extending the  
limits of that to which one is contributing.<sup>17</sup>

This excerpt from Stuart Hall's short essay 'Constituting an Archive' encapsulates the exercise I am undertaking here by shifting through the traces, fragments and anecdotes on the life of artist Shilu Pyari. I propose 'living-in-archives' as a method that flows in tandem with my writing-in-progress fieldnotes, and a reckoning with the loss and haunting of women artists from the writing and imagining of Nepali art historiography. In many ways, this undertaking is fraught with incompleteness and incoherencies. I implicitly ask: what can the labour and limits of such an exercise be? And to what extent is my exercise of living-in-archives able to constitute Shilu Pyari's living archives?

Methodologically, I resist the desire to recuperate Shilu Pyari entirely, because it is the obfuscation of her life and work that generates a critical approach to deal with the marginal

<sup>17</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive', op cit, p 92



location of gendered figures in art history. I dwell in the archival traces, fragments and anecdotes despite the dangers of this kind of haunting. As Hall reminds us, it is in these moments of danger that one can arrive at heterodoxy. Both living-in-archives and living archives offer a possibility of art historiographical heterodoxy through which marginal figures and their contributions can be centred. This exercise can perhaps be extended to thinking about social figures that belong to various categories of gender, class and caste, as well as region, that have been rendered provincial in the writing of art histories, not only in Nepal but also in South Asia and beyond.

The question remains whether this methodological labour can constitute Shilu Pyari's living archives. A few months after having completed the main part of this text, I was able to meet a relative of Shilu Pyari, who became instrumental in introducing me to her son who had held on to some of her original works as well as numerous photographs of her artworks. This encounter, while serendipitous, indicates that the labour of living-in-archives can lead not only to moments of danger but also of discovery. I am hopeful – another dangerous moment – that this is the first step in reconstituting Shilu Pyari's living archives.



*Living Room.* Framed artworks by Shilu Pyari in the artist's residence; on the wall are photo portraits of the artist (left) and of her husband (centre); photo by the author, courtesy of Nabina Shrestha

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