



A NEW FONT OF *spiritual art*

As she stepped into the newly refurbished United Coffee House in Connaught Place on a balmy March afternoon, Dana Lynne Andersen's buoyant energy was palpable. Dressed in salwar kameez and chappals, looking very much the New Age artist that she is, she was evidently excited to be there. It was the prospect of discussing spiritual art which had persuaded her to take an afternoon off from her hec-

AS CONTEMPORARY ART LOSES
ITS WAY IN THE REALM OF
MATERIALISM, AN ARTIST
TAKES A STAND FOR THE CAUSE
OF UPLIFTING, SPIRITUAL ART

by Faraaz Tanveer

tic preparations for her upcoming exhibition in Delhi's India Habitat Centre. Being an amateur artist myself, I was also looking forward to an insightful conversation with a kindred spirit. I was not disappointed.

As she showed me some of her beautiful paintings, I was struck by the effortless flow in form and harmony of colours. Although she is very eloquent herself, it is her paintings that

speak the loudest, a riot of colours ecstatically unfolding on paper. Dana is not just a painter. She is also an illustrator, writer, playwright, philosopher and teacher with a Master's in Consciousness Studies from John F Kennedy University. The unique programmes she offers in schools, universities, conferences and civic centres facilitate the use of art and creativity for spiritual upliftment. She is also a member of The Awakening Arts Studio, which is a worldwide artists network that supports uplifting the human spirit and awakening higher consciousness through the arts.

Andersen recently arrived in India with acclaim from recent solo shows at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco where she was praised as 'a visionary of great importance to the global community', and at the Institute of Noetic Sciences where she was artist in residence for a year. Her recent works in India include her paintings on the covers of two important books – *The Essence of the Bhagavad Gita* and *Revelations of Christ*, both by Swami Kriyananda. A deep love for India and its rich art tradition is a thread that runs through all her work. She urges India to draw from its legacy of spiritual depth to lead the way for the resurgence of spirituality in art. Here are a few excerpts from our conversation.

You have said, "It is no longer sufficient for the artist to express the darkness or to show that we are lost. It is time for all artists to claim the heroic task of finding the light and showing the way." It is quite a departure from the elitist 'art for art's sake' standpoint of many purists. What motivates you to take this stand?

I think 'art for art's sake' may have been a necessary phase in the beginning of modern art because there was a need to break free of the past and the dogmas and demands of tradition. Fifty years ago, breaking the rules was a healthy thing to do. It was, in a sense, a wild adolescent period. It is time for modern art to mature beyond an adolescent 'rebel without a cause' and take responsibility for its actions and effects. Instead of 'art for art's sake', I am advocating 'art on purpose'. The present global crisis demands a profound response from every aspect of society, especially the arts. It is the artist's role in society to lift the mind and heart above the fray in order to access creative solutions. Art must show solutions and not just reflections of the problems.

What difference do you see between western and Indian art? What role can India play in promoting spiritual art?

The western art scene is very materialistic in nature. India has an opportunity to show the way toward a contemporary art that is vital, soul-nourishing and spiritually alive. India has an ancient tradition of consciousness embedded

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in art, in symbols such as yantra for instance. India can reveal the power of art that is rooted in deep spiritual perceptions, and which promotes the awakening of higher consciousness. Though I must admit that many of the current crop of best-selling Indian artists are still trying to fit in within the western materialistic system.

In the west, there is a 'shock value contest' in the art scene, and a tendency towards depressing, disturbing imagery. For instance, Damien Hurst's *Dead shark in formaldehyde* display. They equate jadedness with depth. Swami Kriyananda compares this with pressing the mouth of a hose water pipe to make the water gush out with

force. Likewise, art based on base emotions can produce a strong push, but the 'sound and fury' is a result of a false constriction, and thus the effect is not of lasting value.

Certainly, India should learn from the west about material efficiency but please let it remain rooted in its own spiritual integrity. Of the many ways that India has the opportunity to lead the world, none is more urgent than in the arts. The weight of the global economy is already shifting as the flow of capital and ideas pours into Asia. India could seize the moment to shift the centre of gravity in art and culture away from the jaded, 'post-modern' culture of NYC toward new

wellsprings of vitality in the arts.

Can modern art be spiritual?

Modern art in the west began at the font of the spiritual, but it has lost its way. Few people realise that abstract art began as a kind of spiritual movement. Kandinsky, one of the first modern artists, wrote about the spiritual potential of abstraction in his work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (published in 1911). He saw abstraction as a way to move beyond a mere reflection of the material world. Abstract art could do more than represent what is already visible – it had the power to bring forth what is otherwise invisible, the spiritual and transcendent realms of timeless truth. India's greatest strength is her anchoring to eternal truths. If she can return the arts to this, their native wellspring, it will be among her greatest contributions.

There's so much potential...where did art lose its way?

Art lost its way when it was hijacked by materialism and consumerism. It has led to a critic/dealer-driven elitist art scene. Also, we need to redefine depth. In the west, depth equals jadedness, angst and restless creativity. India can use its newfound 'in' status in the world of art...

...to make happiness 'cool' again!

Yeah!

Given what you've said, what do you make of India's newfound love for consumerism?

I believe India can skip/ speed up this phase if Indians learn from the west. The west waited till the point of saturation to find out that consumerism is true starvation.

Just like Indians have bypassed land-line phones to jump on to cellphones in many parts, they can move from spiritual junk food to the great wealth of nutritive fare that its tradition has to offer. At the same time, it can learn

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Dana shared her new vision of art through an experiential workshop titled *Art as a Vehicle for Spiritual Evolution*, conducted at Ananda Sangha's Shanti House in Gurgaon, New Delhi.

We were a small group from diverse backgrounds. A judicious combination of reflection, meditation and creative expression marked the proceedings of the day. We learnt to access our inner reservoirs of creativity and spiritual energy through a number of guided visualisations, chanting and movements. As I gently swayed to the music and allowed my body to open up and 'feel', I could sense a distinct sense of release. This latent potential was then utilised for expression in the form of paintings. "It's not the form, but the spirit behind the form that's important," Dana said. 'The process, not the product' was the motto.

Dana pointed out that art and spiritual practice are metaphors for our approach towards life itself. She emphasised the need for the right intention and attention in all work. "Intention is the feminine principle while attention is masculine. Generally, we tend to be biased towards one or the other, giving into

aggressive concentration or a passive slump. Relaxed awareness is the most creative place to be," she said. All we need to do to achieve it is to tune into the right vibrations that surround us. Just like a radio receiver, we can also learn to tune into the higher vibrations by being open and aware.

As I felt my way into my past and the problems and challenges of my life through the instrument of my body, it expressed on paper as a chaotic, angry mêlée of colours. Bright reds and dark blues jostled for space. Inner turmoil was out on paper. Then we proceeded to meditate, through chanting and visualisations, balancing and healing the chakras. What came out on paper surprised me. Right next to the earlier chaotic mess, was a beautiful flower, a gentle flow of harmonious colours, which symbolised my highest aspirations. "Don't get carried away by the end product," warned Dana, "Be honest and be yourself." "But I have no idea what I am doing," exclaimed a worried participant. "Then you are on the right track," was Dana's reply. 'Not knowing is the most intimate' said the Zen master. Now I can see why.

material efficiency, infrastructure development, and principles of civic society from the west.

What is your yardstick of judging good art? What is beautiful to you?

To me, work that awakens the viewer to a higher state of consciousness is beautiful. I believe beauty is not just in the eyes of the beholder; it is a universal phenomenon – a quality of reality as is harmony in nature. A perceptive person can feel the energy that went into and is coming out of a work of art. So the consciousness of the artist while creating the piece is also important.

Spielberg said, "The only difference between erotica and porn is the lighting!"

That is the perfect example of an answer coming from a purely materialistic point of view. To someone who is more sensitive and rooted in the spirit, the difference in energy is very apparent. There is a rich tradition of erotic art in India. If you have a look at those paintings and sculptures, you feel the difference.

Whether art uplifts or degrades, brings the energy up the spine or down the spine, is a very tangible measure for me. Great art illuminates our higher chakras, awakening dormant spiritual potential.

What do you think is the essence of art and being an artist?

The essence of art is to be receptive to inspiration. It is a living, vibrating thing. For me, art should have a fusion of spirit and matter. I am not against the outer paths and techniques, they bring discipline and skill. But the guiding force for the application of the skill has to be the divine.

Divine for you is?

God, whose circumference is everywhere and centre is nowhere. It is the eternal presence, the substrata of our lives. Spiritual art expresses intuitively what quantum physics has proven mathematically – it is the 'implicit order' hidden within the 'explicit order' of manifestation. The Divine is sat-chit-ananda; the being, consciousness and bliss that is the origin and destiny of every creature.

So, what is the purpose of art in your opinion?

I am an advocate of art that returns us to our source – which is the font of the infinite at the heart of every individual. I also understand there to be a spectrum of consciousness and an evolutionary process that moves us from lower chakra domains of survival and ego toward higher chakra realms of refinement and wisdom. As we raise and expand our consciousness, we refine the base elements of human nature into the divine nature. So, for instance, the passion of the second chakra becomes

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Dana's spiritually vibrant art

the compassion of the fourth chakra, which becomes the devotion of the sixth chakra. The arts help to refine us – we are the real instruments! The need of the hour is to move up the spectrum from clever art to creative art towards intuitive art.

How can art help in uplifting humanity?

Both by surrounding ourselves with art that lifts our vision, and by cultivating our own creativity.

In terms of art on our walls, as we find in colour therapy, vastu and feng shui, our environment influences our consciousness. Art carries a vibration that has a real and lasting impact on one's well-being and health. It can either elevate the energies or bring them down. If a picture speaks 1000 words – what are your walls saying? Art will constantly be communicating

to our subconscious mind, so it is vitally important that we pay attention to the energies we put in our environment. I always recommend uplifting, beautiful art up on the wall, rather than some depressing piece in the name of art.

In terms of our own creativity, I believe that creativity is the language of the soul, and that it is the birth right of every individual – it does not belong to an elite group of people called 'artists'. There is a wonderful African proverb that says, "If you can talk, you can sing, if you can walk, you can dance." When we are creative we connect with our inner life, we come home to our own souls. When we come back to that place and live as we are meant to live – we experience peace and joy. We recalibrate to the 'song of creation' and when we are in sync with that, we are

guided in our paths. Our inner peace ripples out and uplifts the whole of humanity toward outer peace.

Are you part of any group or organisation?

I do not endorse any 'ism' or follow any particular ideology. I am the founder of Awakening Arts Network, which is a resource for artists who are using art to uplift humanity. We are a group of more than a thousand artists from around the world who have many different styles and approaches, but a commonality of pursuing art for a higher purpose. We conduct workshops and intensives that use art as a vehicle for shifting consciousness – both individual and collective. We have a retreat centre in Northern California USA – www.awakeningarts.com

How does art help you in your inner quest? What is the relationship between creativity and spirituality?

Real creativity feeds the soul; it attunes one naturally to one's spiritual life. When we come home to our inner life, we remember the vastness of who we really are.

My philosophy is that turning inwards can solve every outer problem. The inner realm in life and art restores authenticity and virtue. When we are at our own centres we are compelled to do what we know is right. We become false and adharmic when we leave our centre and live at the periphery. Nothing outward can ever satisfy us – whether things or relationships or achievements. Eventually we realise that the real life is inside. Art and creativity take us inside. The spiritual quest is the journey back to that centre within.

How would you like to be remembered?

As one who helped bring forth a higher order in art. ☺

*We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.
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