Articulating the Modern Neo-Tantrism and the Art of P.T. Reddy

The recent narrative of twentieth-century art in India, resting upon a new interpretation of the mid-century, post-Independence growth of Indian modern art, traces a large arc from the nationalists at Santiniketan in Bengal to the diasporic concerns of the 1990s. This article presents a case study of artist P. T. Reddy (1915-1997), whose role within that story of modernism is explored so as to understand Indian art of the mid- and late twentieth century as India grappled with Independence, Partition, and the defining of a new ‘India’.

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truggling with the questions of the ‘Indian essence’ in art versus an international modernism, as did many of his contemporaries, in his Tantric-inspired work Reddy presents his location for modernism. Art historian and critic Jaya Appasamy aptly termed him, a ‘transitional modern’, working across the 1947 politico-temporal marker (Appasamy 1972:6-9). If modernism in India is a struggle with and against the norms of a hegemonic Western pattern of modernity, then it is not surprising that artists of this period ‘have seemed to be stuck at the crossing-over’, for ‘they are living out the actual material transition’ (Kapoor 2000:202). Reddy’s work allows us to see that transition clearly and to put some detailed account to the broad narrative of Indian modernist struggles.

After training at the Sir J. J. School of Art in Bombay during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Reddy stopped painting to join the Quit India movement, only to return to art in the mid-1950s. This hiatus separates him from his famous contemporaries of the Bombay Progressive group such as M.F. Husain and P.N. Sutar. Soon after Reddy returned to art, artists such as Biren De (b. 1926) and G. R. Santosh (1929-1997), began working in tantric modes. The so-called ‘neo-tantric’ art movement looked to Buddhist and Hindu tantrism for its esoteric, abstract symbols and re-made this tantric language into a contemporary Indian modernism. Neo-tantrism appealed not only to Indian contemporaries but also to Western audiences, as it represented an ‘authentic’ art form that escaped purely formalistic aspects of 1960s Western art.

In tantric art conceived a space for something deemed impossible: a truly Indian modernism. The question that arises is: how do a group of cultures that have ‘not yet’ arrived at a modern stage achieve modernity? (Chakrabarty 2000:49-50) The case of art history, the gap between the modern and the ‘not yet’ is reinforced by the romanticization and valorization of the native, primitive, indigenous Other as a source for artistic inspiration. Indian modernists saw in tantra the possibility of the Other that was seen as authentic, spiritual, and universal, just as Picasso saw that authenticity in Malian culture. While an Indian modern was not achievable if pursued along the same lines as Western modernism, Reddy found that the hidden nature of tantric imagery fit perfectly with the elusive modernism he sought.

In Sec. Chêvèque’s article, P. T. Reddy, Beginning Sound, n.d.

Two of Reddy’s yantra-inspired images may serve as an introduction to his works. Rather than on drawing on full-blown Tibetan mandala imagery, it is simpler yantra forms that provide Reddy with the framework for his symbolic language.

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References

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P. T. Reddy, Srec Chekre, n.d.