

## Pushing the envelope

by [Swapna Vora](#)



I

"Human skin is a huge topic, it is physically large, conveys much, holds much, this bag, It is complex and this complexity is used to advertise and influence so much." And so Prasanta Sahu pushes this envelope for skin defines race, the treatment of people, of countries, and is a huge emotional metaphor in advertising.

Sahu's large paintings show an interface between the possibilities of electronic technology and human, manual skills. He concentrates on the human body, often his own. "Sometimes I like photos, photos reproduced to use in different ways."

One of his techniques is to take a few inches square photo and blow it up, to perhaps 6 feet, and then copy its details painstakingly on to linen. He takes a picture of his face and rearranges it, he takes a pair of hands and empties them of their human content, he scrolls a roll of skin. He takes a part of his skin, removes its humanity, its connection to a human body, and enlarges it, knowing thoroughly that our vision of anything depends not on the thing itself but on the scale in which it presents itself. Taken out of their customary, familiar context and their well remembered accompaniments, these human components change into weird, cool and beautiful works. Skins remind one of onions. You peel and peel and after each iridescent layer, there is another and finally there is nothing, just tears.

"Sometimes it takes a day to finish a square foot", says Sahu. However this only refers to the actual painting because so much work, so many plans and experiments take place before the painting starts: photographs, changes in scale, changes in location, emptying out contents, and examining the borders of what it means to be a body.

Quantum physics tells us that a body's borders are actually imaginary. What seems solid is shifting: the atoms in us right now are not the same as they were a few seconds ago. Many have escaped, many have entered with every breath, every sigh, every scratch. What lurks under this illusory, seemingly well defined container?



The Large Hand Gloves



Mask III

Another painting called 'Mask' shows a face, a gap and then the part that was cut out. It is precise, looks like an actual mask and reminds one of Eleanor Rigby who:

"Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door  
Who is it for?"

His mastery with the human skin and its pink, unreal tones is delicate and most enjoyable. His detailed depiction of hair filaments and almost actual skin cells speaks of great skill and effort. "I tell students to find out what is unique about them, something that you can do better and more than anyone else and to explore that." He uses conventional brushes and acrylic paint. "Good for our weather, it should last long. I usually take photos, use printouts and enlarge them to perhaps six feet by six feet. All the texture is split and then I paint it." He has such a superb control of color. He talks of his journey to the self, so

emphasized in India. Always we are told, over and over again, "Know your Self", self with a capital S, your real nature, your unique abilities.

He works for seven or more hours daily and takes a couple of weeks to do the final detailing. His backgrounds are painted, not printed, with some variation in hue, often in shades of the same color. He uses several layers of acrylic to achieve a rather lovely smoothness and depth. What is this deep luminous paint, I ask wonderingly. Just acrylic, he replies modestly. That indeed is a master's skill, the ability to use ordinary things and achieve extraordinary results: very touching, this usage of paint. He has letters, lines, an occasional number written in small red scripts over his work. "It is the natural process of lifting photos and bringing them to this large scale, you get these lines. So I decided to incorporate them too. It is a start and stop process, and the scattered letters and numbers are part of the process of enlarging."



Mute

"The letters are metaphors for social events, things that happen in our world. We watch live wars on TV. But this too is packaged and assembled for us. Is it real? To reassemble an event or person is a violent act."

"I don't believe in revealing or copying nature. Others have done it often, there is no need to keep doing it. My work is relevant and related to this experience of seeing reassembled events and their violent packaging."

'Spiraled' is a sharp, lovely painting, and offers enjoyable vertigo, a slight disorientation. It originated from a photo his wife took of him.

Trained as an engineer, he said he worried about technical methods, how he could get a good enlarged reproduction. 'Leading edge' of course is when technology gives us wonderful results. How can we get wonderful prints that show the nature of these luminous works, I countered. He smiled because we, possibly, still do not have the kind of reproduction that offers the original luminous glow of a painting. 'Bleeding edge' then is technology, when it may not work as expected.



Self-reassembled

Just after he had finished his college and got a diploma, he told his parents he would not be an engineer. He wanted to be an artist. "I found engineering dealt with a small part of creation, of getting someone electricity. I was not content with that. The source of that energy, that was interesting. Skin and hair were what inspired me."

His father said, "Those sign painters, is that what you want to do?" There were no art schools in Sahu's small town in Orissa.

"What about Orissa's palm painters?" I asked and we both sighed ecstatically about their lovely, painstaking, hereditary work.

"There was a lack of information, I did not know what was possible", he said. Today these hereditary craftsmen are invited regularly to come and work at the prestigious Santiniketan. Those days I did not really have access to learning with them." He thinks about what skin means, the color of his skin, everyone's skin. "It can be a metaphor for what is around me."

In New York, it is a reminder of institutionally accepted slavery in American history where black skin coloring was deemed sufficient to consider the children of Ham as permanent slaves. Slavery by European colonizers was justified by quoting the biblical story that the dark Ham was cursed by Noah and hence all blacks must serve and suffer. Actually it was apparently Canaan who was cursed but whatever! George Lamming's 'In the Castle of My Skin' expands how colonialism has attributed meaning to skin color. Skin stories then are moist, clammy, flushed stories of goose bumps, tingling, or shivers like earthquakes.

Skin depictions remind one of the Japanese internment. "I knew that I was there for no crime other than the color of my skin," says a civilian of Japanese origin, imprisoned during the war. Asians were not allowed into America because of their color. Just typing 'the color of my skin' into google brought up: Determining Skin Tone - Dilemma of the Week - Makeup - iVillage Beauty!

Prasanta commented how much he enjoyed his recent trip to Puerto Rico, "Nice people, a bit like Goa: they work and then play happily, a similar culture of food and wine." Will it be reflected in his forthcoming work? Possibly.



Spiralled

Notes:

Prasanta Sahu paints and teaches at Santiniketan, India's beloved school of art and culture.