

## Cobo Social Tsherin Sherpa On Representing Nepal For The Country's Venice Biennale Debut

By Nicholas Stephens, June 15, 2022.



“Tales of Muted Spirits—Dispersed Threads—Twisted Shangri-La” by Tsherin Sherpa, installation view at Sant’Anna Project Space One, Venice, 23 April – 27 November 2022. Photo by Ricardo Tosetto. Image courtesy of the artist and Rossi & Rossi.

Now in its 59th edition, the 2022 Venice Biennale sees Nepal make its very first contribution. Tsherin Sherpa’s exhibition is a compact yet expansive journey of tangled bronze limbs, woven threads and dismembered thangkas. The artist explains rather than exoticises, keeping a watchful eye on all threats, foreign and domestic. We interviewed the artist shortly after the opening of this landmark event.

Nepal may be poorly understood—seen as a utopian, spiritual paradise, whose citizens rise above the earthly pettiness of tawdry commerce. Misunderstandings can lead to dangerous misadventures. The opening sentence of Tsherin Sherpa’s exhibition wall text at the Nepal Pavilion at the 59th Venice Biennale reads like an epitaph to the ignominious retreat by the US from Afghanistan in 2021: “The highlands of Asia have always bewildered those who attempt to assert influence over this unwieldy topography”.

Sherpa’s joyful, colourful and tactile exhibition, “Tales of Muted Spirits—Dispersed Threads—Twisted Shangri-La”, harnesses the tabula rasa of its maiden Venice outing to shine a light on Nepal, showcasing its traditional craft of carpet-weaving, the vibrant and distinctive thangkas, and its sculptural prowess. He and the team of artists he gathered underline the vibrancy of ingrained beliefs and traditions as they face the march of time and outside influence. With allusions to colonialism, domestic state injustice, and Nepal’s appeal to the hedonistic, free-love generation, this small exhibition is educational without ever losing its spark and vibrancy. What emerges is an experience which is defiant, reassuring, and beautiful.

We spoke to Sherpa to discuss this milestone in Nepali art history.

CS : What does it mean for you, and for Nepal, to be able to participate in the Venice

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**Biennale for the first time?**

**TS :** The Venice Biennale is one of the oldest and most prestigious platforms supporting diverse artistic voices from around the world. It is a great honour for Nepal to be represented here for the first time. I feel honoured and privileged to be able to represent the Nepal Pavilion, for it is a celebration of Nepal's unique artistic lineage. We are especially grateful to the Rubin Museum, our international partner, whose financial support and immense trust made this participation possible. Furthermore, we are indebted to the Nepal Academy of Fine Arts and the Siddhartha Arts Foundation for their valuable support in making this possible.

**CS :** One of the subheadings is "Twisted Shangri-La". Do you feel people have a misconception of Nepal as a kind of earthly paradise?

**TS :** I do think that Nepal is often portrayed as a static and secluded "Shangri-La", when in fact Nepali society has been an actively moving and dynamic society. The cross-cultural exchanges have led to a unique sensibility of its art and culture. The diverse art forms such as thangka painting, bronze sculpture and carpet weaving are some of the manifold artistic expressions of Nepali society. I was inspired to present these different artforms to solidify the identity of Himalayan art as varied and wide-ranging.



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**CS :** The pavilion includes thangka imagery of Garuda and Naga, and alludes to themes of oppression by the state. Is this mix of religious and secular subjects a specifically Nepali style?

**TS :** Garuda and Naga iconography are common motifs of thangka art. The Naga represents poison or illness whereas the Garuda holding the Naga represents the cure of that illness. Making this artwork during the pandemic, I was inspired by the collective feeling of unease and uncertainty around me, and I wanted to find a way of alleviating it through my work. More importantly, these icons are derived from old thangka murals and enlarged into new compositions in my work. It mirrors the way traditional communities move to new spaces and find ways of continuing their culture in their own

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individual ways. To me these paintings are not about fragmentation, but regeneration and recreation.

**CS :** You lived in the US for 20 years. How did the arts scene change in Nepal during that time?

**TS :** After living and working in the US for 20 years, I came back to Nepal in around 2015. I was pleasantly surprised to see a diverse and vibrant art scene here. I see more financial support from international organisations as well as more commercial and non-commercial art spaces here. I hope for more collective efforts from the government as well as non-government sectors to support local art programmes.

Your pavilion is so varied and tactile. How did you select the artists who worked in your team to help bring it all to life?

I am deeply inspired by the traditional artforms of Himalayan communities, for they are reservoirs of our collective history and knowledge. For the Nepal Pavilion, I wanted to collaborate with skilful traditional masters from Nepal working in various artforms. I was fortunate to meet with skilled artists working in sculpture, thangka painting and carpet weaving who were excited to collaborate with me to create new narratives using our traditional art styles. I wanted to include distinct mediums and materials to give a glimpse of the diversity of Himalayan art.



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**CS :** For the sculpture, what were the challenges of turning a two-dimensional painting into three-dimensional bronze?

**TS :** The three-dimensional bronze installation in the pavilion is an abstract recreation of various hand and feet postures of thangka figures, taken from a two-dimensional composition. The collaboration with traditional bronze sculptors was both exciting and challenging, as they mostly create representative figures of deities through the lost-wax

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process, a gradual process that has been perfected over generations. Because we had to complete the work in less than three months, we needed new solutions to create the complex image. We worked together to sculpt and cast individual hands, then welded them together to compose them three-dimensionally. Despite the difficulties, it was humbling to see traditional artists excited and motivated to apply their techniques to new narratives.



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**CS :** Another subheading of the Nepal Pavilion is "Dispersed Threads". In fact, Nepal is known as a major exporter of carpet. At the Biennale, the tiger carpet is unfinished. Can you help us understand what this interrupted, half-finished state symbolises?

**TS :** The tools and looms from the carpet installation have been taken from one of the oldest carpet factories in Nepal, in Solukhumbu. Now defunct, it was established with support from the Swiss government to provide employment to Tibetan refugees in the 1970s. Carpet weaving was one of the distinct skills the Tibetan community carried with them and was handed down primarily through women. This industry boomed through the decades, and at its peak in the 1990s, carpet was one of Nepal's biggest exports. Due to various limitations within and around the industry, this unique carpet art and manufacture has shrunk massively today. Through this installation, I wanted to acknowledge this part of our history and hint at its unfulfilled potential.

**CS :** How do you think visitors will be affected by what they see? Will they view Nepal

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in a new light?

**TS** : I hope the pavilion opens a window into the rich world of Nepali art, and the diverse Himalayan communities within it. I hope it introduces viewers to the masterful traditional art that is being carried on by living masters today. Moreover, I hope it inspires not just the international audience but the traditional artists and local communities themselves as well. I feel that an acknowledgement through such an important platform as the Venice Biennale will embed the importance of our traditional art in our institutions as well as communities.