Abstract

‘Grotesque’ is a genre of art in which art works have elements such as absurd, fantasy and disgust. Initially this genre gained popularity in decorative art in the late fifteenth to the seventeenth century Europe, but gradually and especially in the twentieth century, artists started to realise its potential and incorporated it in mainstream art as well. Even in the contemporary times the lure of ‘Grotesque’ is thriving and artists around the world keep innovating different ways to present this element in their works. Artists in India have been using grotesque in their paintings and sculptures since a very long time. Some of the contemporary Indian artists of too have taken a shine to this genre. In contemporary art of India we come across various art works like installation works, paintings and sculptures in which artists have expressed their creativity in this genre. In this paper I will be discussing various art works created in contemporary India by incorporating ‘Grotesque’, although my main focus will be essentially on the works of artists Mithu Sen and Shine Shivan.

1. Introduction

The ‘absurd’ in art has been attracting artists since the beginning of creative activity itself and even today artists have not given up on this element which is part of their fantasies. Artists around the world have been painting and sculpting forms which were distorted, unreal and sometimes even monstrous in appearance. The contemporary artists have carried on the tradition of including absurd and repulsive in their works. This genre is referred to as the ‘Grotesque Art’. This genre of art has no geographical, cultural or religious limitation. Across time, artists have been practicing this genre and till day continue to do so.

Grotesque in plain English means ‘strange distorted; absurd’ it may also be referred for works of art which evoke a repulsive reaction. This may include describing weird shapes and distorted forms as strange, fantastic, ugly, incongruous, unpleasant, or disgusting in art, performance, and literature. Usually the art works with the element of grotesque is laced with shock value and these works simultaneously invokes in an audience a feeling of uncomfortable bizarreness as well
as sympathetic pity. Although the term Grotesque originated from Italian word grottesco, which literally means "of a cave," but gradually it started to represent works which have unpleasant visual elements in them. Initially the term, in the fifteenth century, was only used for an extravagant style of Ancient Roman decorative art which was accidently rediscovered on the walls of basements of the Roman ruins. These ruins were uncovered and entered from the top so grottesco seemed to be perfect term to refer to this art as these ruins appeared more like underground caves. The decorative art on the walls of Roman ruins was very different from the classical works to which the artists of the Renaissance had an easy excess. The artists who viewed these decorations were fascinated and started copying and developing it to include it in their works. The Grotesque ornament was intensively used in various art and craft forms. Master artist like Raphael too incorporated this ornamental style while painting some interiors in the Vatican. For a long time in Europe the term was used to describe decorative patterns using curving foliage elements. These decorations were done on walls, in stone and also in books as borders of illuminated manuscripts. Artists and artisans were essentially developing Grotesque as a decorative art form, using it on walls, ceiling, book covers and borders and also in metal works. It was in Germany of the sixteenth century that the term grotesque got another connotation added to it i.e. ‘monstrous’ which gave a new direction to this genre of art. In the twentieth century Europe the Grotesque ornamental design was losing its lure as a decorative art and the term Grotesque was gradually emerging as an art which was more at par with its contemporary meaning. In its modern avatar, the art works with unnatural and disgusting forms were started to be referred to as Grotesque Art. Although the term Grotesque originated in Europe but in other parts of the world too various arts with this element were made. In ancient Indian and Chinese art various monstrous forms were painted and sculpted. These forms were outcome of religious iconography, especially in India and were very different from the decorative art of the west in this genre. In fact these types of forms in Indian art were referred to as grotesque forms by some European art historians of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

2. The element of Grotesque

As discussed in the previous paragraph, artists around the world have been incorporating element of grotesque in their works since millenniums for various reasons and creative requirements. Although the decorative association of this genre is not as popular as it was few centuries back, but the contemporary artists have not only kept the concept of grotesque alive in their works but they have incorporated it in their works quite innovatively as well. Composite images, deformed and mutilated bodies started appearing in the modern art of the twentieth century. In the twentieth century, Grotesque was incorporated by artists of Dadaism, Cubism and many other movements of the time. The element of Grotesque can be seen in the works of artists like Marcel Ducham, Salvador Dali, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and many others. Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, who lived in the gloomy London of the 1940’s and 50’s, which was still recovering from the scars of the Great War, produced works in which the element of Grotesque is seen in the human forms that they painted. While Francis Bacon painted human forms with fractured faces, Lucian Freud preferred to paint stark studies of oversized bodies. Likewise in Indian art too Grotesque was reflecting in the works of various artists of pre and post-independence. Artists like Ravindranath Tagore, Ramkinkar Bajii, Jamini Roy and others, were using metamorphic or composite images in their works. Although it is important to mention that some of these forms were outcome of religious iconography, but there were other examples which were created independent of any such
influence. Jamini Roy has created religious composite images of lord Ganesha as well as non-religious composite images like the ‘Winged Horse’ in his paintings. Along with the pioneer modern artists of India the second generation of Indian artists too ventured, time and again, into this genre. Some of the prominent Indian artists who used grotesque in their works are K.G.Subramanyan, Manjit Bawa, Ganesh Pyne, G.M. Shaikh, Bhupen Khakkar, Shakti Barman, Manu Parekha etc. However the new turn in this genre came with the growing popularity of the installation works among the next generation of Indian artists. They were able to bring contemporary Indian art to a global level and also gained acclaim for their works.

The discussion on the element of Grotesque in contemporary art is incomplete without mentioning the British artist Damien Hirst, who has time and again given powerful statements about death, decay and impermanence in his works. With his works like, ‘The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living’, he took grotesque to a different level altogether. Works like these are the face of contemporary ‘Grotesque Art’. The beauty and repulsiveness of his daring presentations is fascinating. Installation works with the grotesque have been engaging interests of many contemporary artists globally. In India too many artists have turned towards this genre to produce works which attract and shock the viewer’s simultaneously. Artists like Jitish Kallat, Bhariti Kher, Mithu Sen and Shine Shivan incorporated this genre in their works. Today’s viewers of the digital age are constantly exposed to mutilated and fantastic images in movies and digital games. It takes a lot to shock these viewers but still the artists of contemporary Grotesque Art continue to stay ahead of their viewers and provide the element of shock and disgust in their works. I would like to focus on two artists from India, Shine Shivan and Mithu Sen, who have been successful in generating the desired effect on the viewers.

Figure 1: Detail of decoration in the Domus Aurea in Rome, 64-68 AC. Found in the collection of the Domus Aurea, Rome.
3. Shine Shivan Taxidermy

Shine Shivan is known for his grandeur in the contemporary art world but what makes him one of a kind is his works which are beautiful and disgusting at the same time. He is capable of attracting a viewer towards his works and then step back in disgust. One thing that his work can never evoke is the feeling of indifference towards them. The viewers of his art works always have an opinion about them. Shivan uses taxidermy in his work and have master the skill as he seldom get people to do it for him. Working with the dead bodies is a constant feature of his works. In this regard he has some similarity to the works of Damien Hirst, but Shivan has been lucky to get a more tolerant reaction from viewers unlike some of the early works of Hirst. In 2013, Shivan presented his installation work titled ‘Glimpse of Thirst’ in which he had created flamboyant outfits made up of marble eyeballs and other such materials, worn by fibreglass skeletons.

Figure 2: Glimpse of Thirst (13), 2012- Used fabric, jute, fiber, dentures, marbles, skeltons, fiber glass, glass lens, mango seeds, artificial hair, feathers, sequins, beads
He had also installed a video with sexual content, houlish dolls and some sculptural installations in this work. Although the material used was non-organic like, cloth, artificial hair, fibreglass, paint, but his work represented an obvious brutality like his other works which often have an undercurrent of violence in them. In 2009 he had created a series of photographs titled ‘Sperm Weaver’ in which he had climbed a tree naked. His choice of colours is rich and vibrant, especially when he chooses to use them against black background, due to which his works commands attention of the onlooker. However Shivan sometimes shows a tendency of over indulging in disturbing the viewer rather than concentrating on retaining the depth and novelty in his works. In Second Hand Pepe, an assemblage of found and used elements, Shivan speaks of the way socialized human beings invent versions of the self-their identities, thoughts and sexualities. Thereby he suggests the instability of gender, implying that it can always be subverted or queered by practices such as drag and cross-dressing.

4. Mithu Sen Modern Essence Of Grotesque Art
Works of Mithu Sen, on the other hand, are subtle but powerful. Mithu is known as one of the young vibrant faces of contemporary Indian art. She explores sexuality, the female body and identity as a contemporary Indian woman in her work. Her works sometimes include Grotesque as a medium to covey her thoughts or stand for a cause. In her works, Mithu have been using human hair, blood and teeth which sometimes induce a feeling of repulsiveness in the viewer. Mithu Sen explains, "By using hair, teeth, and also my own blood, I tried to add a dimension of the organic to the overall materiality of my work". These elements also add to the element of Grotesque in her works. By using such elements she also gives universality to her work as these organic features are part of all human bodies irrespective of class, colour, race or caste. In her installation work titled ‘Border Unseen’ Mithu has created an eighty feet sculptural barricade made primarily of dentures. The work also includes small figurines of people, skulls, and toys peeking out from the bubble-gum coloured rubble that forms the gums in her installation.
Figure 4(a, b): Mithu Sen, Border Unseen, 2014.

The viewer has to carefully look for these small details as the pearly white teeth dominate the work. This hide and seek feature indulges the viewer in the work making it more interesting. In her paintings too grotesque content make an evident appearance. She uses human body to deal with taboo aspect of human culture like sex and death. Interestingly her paintings have a morbid quality presented in a playful way. This aspect of her work attracts the viewer although the subject relates to in her work may make the viewer uneasy on a closer inspection. However her works are immensely enjoyable and truly represent the modern essence of Grotesque Art.

5. Conclusion

In contemporary Indian art Grotesque is adopted by artists to get viewers’ attention towards their works. Contemporary artists of India have successfully incorporated this genre in their works. Although these works are sometimes shocking for the viewer, but surprisingly Indian viewers show more tolerance towards such works. This acceptance could be due to fewer footfalls to art exhibitions and also because people who frequent art exhibitions in India are usually well acquainted various international art trends and concepts. This gives an artist freedom of expression. However there are definitely minor hinges in accepting and also creating art works in the genre of Grotesque but overall Indian art viewers and artists have been successful in doing so. This gives hope for a brighter future of art in India.

References

[3] Partha Mitter. *Much Maligned Monsters: A History of European Reactions to Indian Art*, University of Chicago Press, 1992. In this book Partha Mitter discusses in detail the reaction of various European historians and travellers on seeing the composite images in religious art of India. They generally referred as grotesque and for a very long time it was believed in Europe that Indians worshiped monsters.