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Artistic medium: Painting, Installation and Performance art

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I am pleased to present my ongoing Art Project “WHITE BUTTERFLIES “for the Arts and Society open call.

After exhibiting my works in galleries, I discovered that artworks are largely procured by wealthy buyers or alternatively, handed to intellectuals who maintain their exclusivity to a group of elites and individuals of privileged background. I thought that art should be for all. Therefore, I stepped away from the gallery system and spent a long stretch of time trying to make art accessible to all.

I kept experimenting with complex ideas to amaze the audience with my art. To my dismay, the attempts were not successful as I hoped. After countless failures and rejection, I was beginning to feel discouraged. Then on one fine day, while I was contemplating on a different idea, a tiny white butterfly came and perched in my studio.

In that very moment, a revelation occurred to me and transformed my art practice. I swept aside all the complex ideas and started a simple art project namely White Butterflies and my work has undergone a significant evolution since then.

My idea was simple: to utilize a motif of a paper cut butterfly. Every day, I went around the city installing white butterflies to discover what realizations such an act would bring me. The installations seemed to stir curiosity, wonder and joy in the passersby. As a result, the number of people who discovered the work soared and I started to receive requests from individuals and communities who wish to spread white butterflies in their environment across the world. Following to that, they began to establish networks and expand this movement in ways which have brought themselves the essence of love, hope and peace in their own contexts.

There is no any specific methodology adopted for my work. Instead I release my idea into the world and let them take a life of their own! By doing this, White Butterfly has evolved from a simple art project into a global expression of love, unity and activism, spreading across 40 countries. Over the past 5 years, innumerable connections have been formed around the world. In conjunction with that, I feel the ever growing responsibilities and opportunities to promote harmony between people by co-creating, sharing and expanding our perception

I receive requests from individuals and communities globally for white butterflies to spread in their environment, followed by positive messages and photos. Social media plays a vital role in communicating and spreading of this project. I upload collected artifacts daily, primarily through Face book. This allows for a direct interchange between artist and audience. White butterflies are given free of charge and sustained by generous donations from individuals that cover courier charges and few production costs.

I feel that Art has a broader role to engage the society in such a way that it can inspire others to become agents of change in their own ways. A mother in Scotland wrote a name of her departed daughter on butterfly wings and placed it on a tree. Soon; the villagers learnt that it was a prayer and a way of remembering her daughter on the sixth anniversary of her death. Many were touched and came together to write the names of their lost ones on white butterflies too. Gradually, people started presenting flowers and prayers at that memorial tree, this has now become a sacred site for the yearly ritual.

To quote a woman who participated in a community which created White Butterfly Action in the city of Brussels, “*The beauty of this project is that an artist is turning everyone into an artist with his stroke of goodness.*”

Following the Brussels attack, citizens installed white butterflies on the Brussels stock exchange building which is one example of the social role of art in the co-creation of solidarity, hope and peace in the midst of conflict. People are wishing them to go all around the world and some are taking these butterflies to appear in conflict areas like Syria and Afghanistan, Palestine. Similarly, Meld and Municipality of Athens celebrated International Peace Day by creating installations of white butterflies with the community in the municipality spaces.

This small project took a greater turn in both local activism and global community arts based projects after 'Occupy Baluwatar' in Kathmandu, Nepal. On December 2012, a group of citizens started a movement known as 'Occupy Baluwatar' where they gathered outside the Prime Minister's residence across a period of 100 days to bring attention to the gender-based violence. What started as a peaceful protest grew into aggression with continual arrests and interference by political parties. I distributed butterflies to the protestors, asking them to demonstrate peacefully. To my surprise, they began to display White Butterflies as a symbol of the protest. As the white butterflies were already visible around the city, it became associated with the movement unintentionally, but also positively.

This single project has demonstrated practical change with many outcomes. One inspiring example was the White Butterfly Movement that rose up in response to the Kathmandu Road Expansion Project. 1200 plus trees in my city had been marked for destruction. I began installing White Butterflies on those trees and posted photos on my Facebook notifying people about this disturbing fact. Many youths came together and continued these installations until all of the trees had been covered. Through our various campaigns and protests, we were ultimately able to meet with government officials and the Chinese engineers responsible for Road expansion Project. We managed to save 25% of the trees that were marked to be bulldozed. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/bibbi-abruzzini/meet-the-man-behind-the-w_b_7458166.html

The White Butterfly project became a powerful and unanticipated expression of humanity-at the time of need and crisis. This was most apparent during, after the Nepal earthquake of 2015, which killed 9,000, leaving the country in chaos with 400,000 displaced. I went to survey the situation at the open ground of Tudikhel, where thousands of people were living in makeshift tents. To our dismay we discovered that there are no toilets. Using our pocket money we purchased the required materials to begin digging toilets. Realizing the enormity of our task, we posted photos on social media. Friends and strangers joined to support us. By the end of the day, we had built 45 emergency toilets. That night I posted photos of what we had accomplished in a day. When I woke, thousands around the world had shared the post. The global network of friends that had been created White Butterfly project was galvanized into action. Through these combined efforts, our volunteer team was enabled to build 200+ toilets before any other organization had even begun to address these serious sanitation issues of both public health and dignity. The Nepali Diaspora and others also adopted the White Butterflies for fundraising projects for earthquake aid. We expanded to rebuilding a school and relocating an entire village.

<https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/nepal-earthquake-milan-rai-campaign-5691072>

What started as a personal quest in search for new ways to express resulted into white Butterflies. And what I created in my small town in response to my surroundings in a way has gone far beyond the simple manufacturing of objects. White Butterflies" has been spread by various Individuals, organizations, schools, Universities, hospitals etc. In April 2016, Harvard University (South Asia institute) invited me to create white butterfly installation across the campus and share my journey with the students and faculty. Last year in May, We installed thirty thousand white butterflies in south bank center, London.

Although my works contains deep and personal message at their core, they are open to audiences' personal interpretation. I never try to control the spread or dictate the meaning of this symbol. People can add their own meanings and colors to it.

I collaborated one whole year with a Finnish theater group from the city of Lahti where various art practitioners are using white butterflies, to express themselves through dance, poetry, theater, music, art, photography and films throughout the whole next year.

My art practice fairly aligns with the values of Arts and Society as it speaks of the solidarity between people and encourages actions to achieve visions of our hopes in every domain of society. Now I share the creative moments with people from all walks of life, who have stepped forward to co-create and spread White Butterflies in many cities around the world. The synergy of wider communities has morphed this art project into an ever growing process.

<http://www.scmp.com/video/hong-kong/2059206/nepalese-artist-milan-rai-uses-white-butterflies-honour-dead-gurkha-soldiers>

<https://globalvoices.org/2016/04/24/these-white-butterflies-from-nepal-are-spreading-a-message-of-hope-and-social-change-throughout-the-world/>

<http://www.tedxbrussels.eu/blog/the-butterfly-man-on-the-factors-that-will-shape-the-deeper-future>

<http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/nepal-earthquake-milan-rai-campaign-5691072>