

The Universal and the Located: Barwe's *Untitled 3* as a meditation on time

By Tara Brahme, 2025

Prabhakar Barwe's (1936 – 1995) *Untitled 3*, painted in 1970 with acid colour on dupion silk, is an arresting image not only in its bold use of colour and material but most significantly in its experiments with the grammar of Neo-Tantric art. Taken as a whole, *Untitled 3* combines simple forms and discernible shapes falling between the genres of “symbolic abstractionism” and “Neo-Tantric art” – the visual grammar of both categories will be unfolded in more detail below. For now, these art historical labels point us towards a dominant theme in the reception of Barwe's work: ‘universality’. An alumnus of the J.J. School of Art, Mumbai, Prabhakar Barwe was described by fellow artist M.F. Hussain as one of the only two genius painters (the other being Vasudeo S. Gaitonde). In his tribute to Barwe, Hussain characterised Barwe's paintings as “highly intellectual [in content]” and “universal” in style. This praise of universality for Barwe's work is reiterated in almost every biography, exhibition catalogue, blog entry and explainer video, written and published in tribute to the late artist.¹

The politics of universality itself, however, has remained unexamined. To avoid falling into the trap of the hegemony of enlightenment universalism, it is imperative that we centre the located-ness of Barwe's artworks and approach

¹ Jesal Thacker, “Whispering Green: Moving towards ‘Chance Aesthetics,’” *Prinseps*, June 30, 2021, <https://prinseps.com/research/whispering-green-moving-towards-chance-aesthetics/>; Pankaja JK, “Feeling the Presence in Absence! Remembering Prabhakar Barwe - by Pankaja JK,” accessed February 10, 2025, <https://www.artblogazine.com/2012/03/feeling-presence-in-absence-remembering.html>; “DAG: Prabhakar Barwe (Untitled) - YouTube,” accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGHwzq7C46Q&ab_channel=dagworld; “Prabhakar Barwe,” MAP Academy, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://mapacademy.io/article/prabhakar-barwe/>; “Prabhakar Barwe: Between Object & Space | DAG,” accessed February 10, 2025, <https://dagworld.com/prabhakar-barwe-between-object-and-space.html>.

the universal through the resonances created by the work and its symbolic language.² I thus analyse the relationship between the ‘universal’ and the ‘located’ in Barwe’s *Untitled 3*. I ask, “what can we categorise as ‘universal’ and ‘located’ respectively in Barwe’s *Untitled 3*? And, (how) are they entangled?”

Prabhakar Barwe was born in the Indian state of Maharashtra and lived from 1936 to 1995. Throughout his career, Barwe was largely based out of Bombay (renamed Mumbai officially only in 1995). In the 1950s, Barwe joined the Weavers’ Service Centre, an initiative set up by Pupul Jaykar (Indian activist, writer, historian). During this time, Barwe was posted in Varanasi where he spent a few years after his graduation from the JJ School of Art in 1959 until his return to Bombay in 1965.³ Many of Barwe’s biographers highlight his time in Varanasi, for it was here that he encountered Tantra and its philosophy, which would soon make its way into many of his paintings, including *Untitled 3* discussed in this paper.

One of Barwe’s central artistic preoccupations, visible also in *Untitled 3*, was the question of form. ‘Form’ may be understood for Barwe’s context as the most basic element that constitutes an object: “every single object that we see...[has] a form by which we recognise those substances and objects...Most people don’t see the thousands of objects that are around them as forms. An artist on the other hand, is sharply aware of the universe of forms he inhabits. On occasion,

² The phrase ‘hegemony of enlightenment universalism’ is one that I use by drawing on Partha Mitter’s paper, *Interventions: Decentring Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery*. In this 2008 article for *Art Bulletin*, Mitter sets up his argument by critiquing the eurocentrism of a 2004 publication *Art since 1900* in which he comments that despite certain important inclusion from non-Euro-American modernisms, “the canon is not significantly enlarged. Rather, the non-Western artists are brought in primarily on account of their compatibility with the avant-garde discourse in the West.” Thus Mitter, goes on to critique the “wider global ambitions of the book”, by “[situating] its ‘universalist’ canon within an epistemological framework that goes back to the Enlightenment.” Through this Mitter proposes that universality has a “pervasive hold” which is “hegemonic”. (Partha Mitter, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery,” *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008): 531–48.)

³ “Prabhakar Barwe,” MAP Academy, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://mapacademy.io/article/prabhakar-barwe/>.

this awareness becomes so intense that he sees not only the outward forms of objects but the smaller forms that they contain and the even subtler forms that those small forms contain.”⁴ The idea of a ‘pure form’ for Barwe was thus an important tool and artistic element which helped him to separate the object from its function: “[an artist] looks at them all as pure forms, dissociated from their functional context.”⁵ Barwe’s work, with its focus on form, has often been categorised between the genres of symbolic abstraction and Neo-Tantric art.⁶

Barwe’s encounter with and turn to Tantra, therefore, had less to do with its religious philosophy and was once again more centrally rooted in how it relates form to space. The visual grammar of Tantra and paintings that are grounded in this philosophy focuses on geometric forms and a logic of balance. These are most often articulated using bright colours, patterns, and shapes to bring a certain visual symmetry to the image. Artists who are recognised to have been predominantly involved in India’s Neo-Tantra movement in the 1960s and 1970s, such as KCS Panikar and Biren De (among many others) have had their work described as forming the “core vocabulary of the genre” with them “[deriving] their visual metaphors from Tantra ... [abstracting them] through geometric forms and colour or through bright patterns and shapes.”⁷ Described in this manner, one is immediately reminded of the artistic genre of “symbolic abstraction”, one within which Barwe has been categorised.⁸ It falls under the umbrella of abstract art in that it refuses accurate and realistic representation, however, unlike the general genre of abstract art, symbolic abstraction is more invested in “simplified forms and symbols” and “conveying ideas and emotions”. Similarly,

⁴ Bhakti S. Hattarki, “Searching for the ‘Inner Form’ in Prabhakar Barwe’s Blank Canvas,” January 8, 2023, <https://dagworld.com/searching-for-the-inner-form-in-prabhakar-barwe-s-blank-canvas.html>.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ “DAG: Prabhakar Barwe (Untitled) - YouTube,” accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGHwzq7C46Q&ab_channel=dagworld.

⁷ “Neo-Tantric Art,” MAP Academy, accessed February 10, 2025, <https://mapacademy.io/article/neo-tantric-art/>.

⁸ “DAG: Prabhakar Barwe (Untitled) - YouTube,” accessed February 10, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGHwzq7C46Q&ab_channel=dagworld.

between the genres of Neo-Tantra and symbolic abstraction, unlike Panikar and De's work, Barwe's work seems to have leaned more strongly towards the latter genre. Against this background, one may then read Barwe's oeuvre as one that is in a dialogue with the aesthetic language of Tantra. However, rather than working within an artistic language, Prabhakar Barwe uses its syntax to create a context in *Untitled 3* which fits better within the genre of symbolic abstraction.



Fig.

1: Prabhakar Barwe, *Untitled 3*, 1970, acid colour on dupion silk.

The forms and logic of Barwe's *Untitled 3* (fig. 1) divides the square frame of the fabric horizontally into two unequal halves. Both halves are further divided horizontally into two bands of colour each – creating a total of four horizontal bands of colour. The top half of the painting, set against dark purple followed by silver-grey horizontal bands of colour, is the first to draw the viewers' attention. Two large irregular shapes interrupt the bands of colour in the top half of the painting: A cloud-like shape takes over much of the space in the purple, top-most, band. Further elements are contained within this cloud shape: five different floral motives growing out of a single bed. Within the cloud, this bed of 'soil' is further divided into horizontal strips of colour: red forming the top layer, followed by orange, yellow, green and finally a hint of blue in the bottom left corner of the cloud. Viewed together, the cloud seems to contain memories of a rainbow out of which plants grow. Below the cloud, a second irregular shape disrupts the bands of colour, resembling two mountains. Painted entirely black – reminiscent of a silhouette – this dark shape emerges as the central focus of *Untitled 3*. At the valley formed by the meeting of the mountains is a light-coloured semicircle. Perhaps this symbolises the moon. The bottom half of the painting elicits a response that constructs it as a reflection of the top half, even an opposition or contrast to it. The black mountainous form is reflected in a light pinkish colour, though not precisely as a mirror image, and is set against a scarlet band of paint. In its valley, Barwe paints a circle to reflect the semicircle above. This is followed by the final, bottom-most, band of colour: a bright saffron.

Structurally, *Untitled 3* plays with elements of Tantric art – especially its symmetry and geometry – to visualise a rather radical proposition: the sky as an entity with form. A literal analysis of this painting compels one to read the four horizontal blocks of colour as possibly a background which acts as the sky. The top duller tones of purple and silver-grey represent perhaps the dusk and the bottom two blocks of red and saffron stand in for the break of dawn. Its visual

form, however, is articulated through the elements in the painting, like the mountains, sun, moon and cloud, that interrupt this expanse of space, which we come to understand as the sky thus giving it a distinct form. Similarly, in the playful rendition of an inexact reflection, *Untitled 3* refuses to commit to the rigidity of geometric shapes and visual symmetry but, through its composition, continues to reference it constantly. It is perhaps this refusal to commit and Barwe's subversion of the grammar that seems to tie the painting ever so strongly to the syntax of Tantric painting. And while this painting indeed does not demand specialised knowledge of genre to be deciphered, reading it in the context of its relationship to tantra and Barwe's engagement with the philosophy does add a layer of complexity; one that we would lose if we were to simply appreciate it for its universality.

Barwe's art practice was deeply philosophical. He used art as a medium to think through his ideas on time, linearity and the banal. Describing another of Barwe's artworks, *Lantern Structure 3*, a website text of the Dag gallery concludes that, "[his] representations of alternate ways of looking was at par with the modernist questioning of existing states of affairs."⁹ Art was then a way for him to move away from the monotony of reality. Barwe writes,

"reality is monotonous because it is related to time. Its linearity is its limitation. The values we live by are determined by birth and death and the reality of our lives is constricted between these two points. The purpose of art is not to reproduce the monotonous surface of reality, but to go to its roots, to explore it from every angle, and to create something new based on these observations."¹⁰

Untitled 3 in its suggestive juxtaposition of dusk and dawn, day and night where the colours of day and dusk, and dawn and night are closer than the

⁹ "Prabhakar Barwe: Lantern Structure 3," accessed February 10, 2025, <https://dagworld.com/barwep056.html>.

¹⁰ Jesal Thacker, "Whispering Green: Moving towards 'Chance Aesthetics,'" Prinseps, June 30, 2021, <https://prinseps.com/research/whispering-green-moving-towards-chance-aesthetics/>.

colours of day and dawn is a meditation on time. In painting day and night as the reflections of one another, Barwe privileges a cyclical understanding of time over its linearity. The figure of the cloud with the five different plant motifs occupies an interesting position in the composition – one which interrupts the duality which is suggested in the rest of the painting. Read alongside the theme of non-linear time, perhaps the cloud and the plants add an extra layer of meaning vis-à-vis the cycle of birth and death – creation and destruction. *Untitled 3* nudges the viewer to go beyond the linearity of our mortality and thus towards an understanding of ourselves and the world as cyclical beings. Finally, one's attention is also drawn to the composition's unequal horizontal division which again lends a playful movement and rhythm to the painting.

Prabhakar Barwe's *Untitled 3* is, as I suggest in the title of this essay, a meditation on time. It is a strong suggestion to move away (even if momentarily) from our dominant understanding of time as linear towards a possible conception of time as cyclical. In doing this, Barwe is driven by a larger modernist impulse to "[question] the existing state of affairs".¹¹ What makes this painting of Barwe's located in the South Asian context, however, is *how* he chooses to deliberate on these themes. Returning to the questions that have driven my investigations in this essay – what can we categorise as 'universal' and 'located' respectively in Barwe's *Untitled 3*? And, (how) are they entangled? – the themes of *Untitled 3* and the questions of form and space that preoccupy most of Barwe's work do indeed resonate with artistic modernisms' concerns and questions worldwide. And it is *Untitled 3*'s affinity to artistic modernisms' multiple articulations alongside its common and discernible forms and shapes that lends itself to claims of universalism. However, part of understanding an art work in its entirety also comes from trying to decipher the syntax of its composition. Barwe's playful referencing of the Neo-Tantric grammar then becomes central to complicating the viewers' visual understanding of *Untitled 3*.

¹¹ "Prabhakar Barwe: Lantern Structure 3," accessed February 10, 2025, <https://dagworld.com/barwep056.html>.

Bringing the located context of a work back into *Untitled 3* adds a layer of artistic and intellectual complexity and play which we would risk losing when we only privilege and praise the universality of Prabhakar Barwe's artistic oeuvre.

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