Cosmic Art: An ongoing exhibition traces the ways in which tantra has inspired art in India and the world.
By Pooja Pillai
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French poet, Franck Andre Jamme, once observed of tantric art found in India, “So strange it is to find in a land so baroque as to almost be overflowing with images, images that are so concise as to almost be dry.” Jamme’s observation is part of his 50-point explanation, printed in the catalogue Field of Color: Tantra Drawings from India (Drawing Papers 50), published to accompany “Field of Color”, an exhibition held in New York in 2004.

Walking through “Thinking Tantra”, an exhibition that presents a speculative history of the tantric tradition in art, one can see why Jamme wrote what he did. In the popular consciousness, Indian art means lushness of details, and yet, there has existed for centuries this other tradition that compressed a wealth of meaning in simple shapes and symbols. At Mumbai’s Jhaveri Contemporary, for example, is an anonymous tantric drawing depicting a dark elongated oval, which represents the brahmanda or the cosmic egg, the source of the universe — an important concept in tantric philosophy.

All the other works in the show — curated by UK-based independent curator Rebecca Heald — similarly engage with tantra. The artists are from all over the globe and include names as diverse as Jagdish Swaminathan, Biren De, Acharya Vyakul, Anthony Pearson, Tom Chamberlain and Claudia Wieser.

It was at “Field of Color” that Heald first encountered tantra drawings. She recalls, “They were exhibited at the same time as a solo show by the American post-minimalist Richard Tuttle. Though they were born of a very particular tradition, the tantra drawings were incredibly familiar.”

Intrigued, she consulted the catalogue accompanying the display, but found that it posed more questions than it answered. Over the years, she tried to find out more about the genre, and had conversations with numerous artists who engaged with tantra in their practice. One of these, Shezad Dawood — whose work is also included in the current exhibition — introduced her to Amrita Jhaveri who, along with her sister Priya, runs Jhaveri Contemporary. Amrita recalls that a number of tantric drawings were displayed at the Venice Biennale in 2013, curated by Massimiliano Gioni. She says, “Since the Biennale, these types of drawing have been surfacing in exhibitions in the US. We were keen to explore the fascination these drawings had for a wide range of artists.”

To those unfamiliar with the spiritual underpinnings of tantric art, the simple shapes and bright colours might bring to mind the more “modern” abstract art. In fact, the purpose of tantric art is coded into the
The works on display demonstrate the ways in which modern and contemporary artists have, over the years, engaged with the ideas of tantra. As Heald says, “The works by Prabhakar Barwe, Biren De, Prafulla Mohanty, Jagdish Swaminathan, and Sohan Qadri are all works from the 1960s onwards by artists who identified with tantra in their work. Biren De and Prafulla Mohanti were part of a group or a movement called ‘Neo-Tantra’ that manifested in exhibitions that in the 1980s toured to Germany, the US and Australia. Goutam Ghosh is a young, contemporary Indian artist who is actively interested in tantra and in a recent catalogue, included an essay on tantra and its recent history by Kaustubh Dehlvi Das.”

The other artists have been chosen based on how they articulate the relationship between their work and what they know of tantra.

“Anthony Pearson, for example, sees a similarity between tantra and its relationship to arcane languages; Tom Chamberlain is intrigued by ideas relating to meditation, intensities of vision, and transcendence; Jean-Luc Moulage has been driven to try and imagine Tantra drawings in three dimensions,” explains Heald.

‘Thinking Tantra’ is on at Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, till March 19