

UNTITLED

BHAJJU SHYAM

# UNTITLED

In 2019, Bhajju Shyam was invited by the Street Art Foundation (St+Art) for a residency, making him the first tribal artist to get a wall in the Open Air Art Galleries of Lodhi Art District in Delhi. The residency entailed immense experimentation where Bhajju worked with stencils, spray paints and cut outs — a paradigm shift from his practice of making detailed oriented artworks. His mural Delhiwala was well received.

Seeing the fun Bhajju had with the mural project, we at Ojas Art encouraged him to experiment with the same medium and imagery on canvas. In 2020, Bhajju created two large size canvases at Jaipur Literature Festival, Jaipur as a part of live art installation, using the new techniques he had learnt. The crowds at the festival were enthralled to see Bhajju's works. Bhajju himself was surprised with the artworks he created.

In March 2020, there was a nation-wide lockdown which gave Bhajju the time to think about this new style of work and the experimentation continued. He felt a sense of freedom in his work likenever before. His scepticism about this new style was quickly replaced with a reassurancethat this was something to be pursued and developed.

Coincidentally, St+Art got in touch with Bhajju for a wall mural in Little India, Singapore incollaboration with Singaporean artist Sam Lo also known by the moniker SKLO. In early 2021, the mural was installed.

*Untitled* as a show title is a bit perplexing considering the innumerable stories and rich narrative of Bhajju's art. The last two years, has seen significant development of a completely new style, which is a paradigm shift from his traditional style of work. We want the viewer to form their own opinion about the new series and not have any pre-conceived notion about the series.

My sincere gratitude to Bhajju for believing in us.

Anubhav Nath  
Director, Ojas Art  
August 14, 2022

# The Wild Side

Lina Vincent

Bhajju Shyam's work has never been static; it is a constantly evolving space that reflects his search for new idioms, an openness to curatorial discussions, and an innate interest in experimentation. While his visual language and narrative content remain rooted (and hearted) in his native Gond culture, the medium and stylistic appearance as well as the essence of contemporary reflections shift and transform. He has attempted different series in the past few years: he has worked in mud relief, black and white drawing, grayscale painting, and recently, stencil cut artwork. It began as a wall-graffiti piece at Lodhi Road, in Delhi's street-art district, in collaboration with St+ART Foundation. It grew from there on into a practice that he felt comfortable transferring to the canvas surface.

Using stencils and spray paint is a technique that is adaptable to bold forms, as the cutting of the stencil for the basic shapes generally limits the inclusion of minute detailing. This technical aspect organically generates a fresh approach to the conventional Gond line, form and space, that is attuned to intricate linearity and dense configurations of the picture-plane.

There is a sense of wildness and abandon, as well as an evocative playfulness in the series of works in the exhibition. The colours are vivid, the forms are bold and graphic, and there are subtle hints of humour and satire that seem to be part of Bhajju's natural inclination in story-telling. He falls back on Gond myths and sayings while also using them as metaphors for contemporary experiences. The fox, a creature that is considered clever as well as friendly, is a favourite of his. The 'Lomdi' features in several of the compositions, by itself and with other animals, sometimes representing human behaviour and tendencies. Among the deer, the tiger and the elephants, the horse, birds and fish, is also the fascinating representation of a porcupine. The animal is sacred to the 'Shyam' clan that Bhajju belongs to. In Gond clans there is an ancestral tradition, going back hundreds of years, of adopting certain species as being auspicious – it revolves around the reverence of different aspects of nature. A clan might have a particular animal, tree, aquatic creature, bird, insect, etc., that they will protect no matter what. They will not allow it to be harmed or killed; they will not eat it. Each clan or extended family has a different set of sacred connections, and in this

way, all the clans together present an interconnected human network that protects the entire forest and ecosystem with all its constituents. Bhajju has depicted the porcupine in its simplest form, imagining its quills as the rays of the sun. Many interesting pieces of folklore are depicted in his works, symbolically, like the one about the origin of the earth which is connected to the mermaids or '*Jalharid mata*', and the fact that earthworms were once the caretakers of the earth before Bada Dev or the primordial maker intervened.

Bhajju takes full advantage of the simplified space with charmingly composed mirror images or grouped animal forms, set against slabs of heightened colour. For him, the eloquence of the colour is a necessity to offset the otherwise minimal drawings. Bright bands of pattern run across the bodies of the creatures, giving them a sense of dynamism and distinction; it carries forward the lineage of traditional Gond painting with a unique flair.

Bhajju is enjoying the freedom offered by the medium. He admits it took a good amount of practice to arrive at this place of fluency and he has learnt a lot along the way. He had



Image courtesy: St+Art Foundation. Photo by: Jay Upadhyay

to work through certain challenges of creating the right kind of design for the stencils (for instance, he realised that trees were not amenable to the stencil cutting); while painting, he lost entire compositions to mistakes in applying pressure with the spray paints, that caused the pigments to load heavily. Sometimes these mistakes were turned to good account, and he appreciates the sometimes-imbalanced work as well.

Deeply sensitive to social hierarchies, and the contrasts between his village life and urban structures, Bhajju uses his observations and experiences of traveling to different places as a positive counterpoint to his understanding of identity and community. He is constantly aware of the changing context of his environment and the loss of nature that is at the heart of Gond life.

As an artist, Bhajju sees the stencil technique as something that he can personalise further, by bringing it together with other elements in his repertoire and continuing his journey in the legacy of those who went before him.

*Lina Vincent is Art Historian and Curator*



*Gathering 1*, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
91 x 69 Inch





*Gathering 2, 2020*  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
91 x 69 Inch



S 3, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
135 x 79 Inch



S 4, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
68.5 x 33.5 Inch



S 5  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint  
on canvas  
68 x 32 Inch



S 6, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
68 X 32.5 Inch



S 10, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
69 x 33.5 Inch





S 11, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
45 x 39 Inch



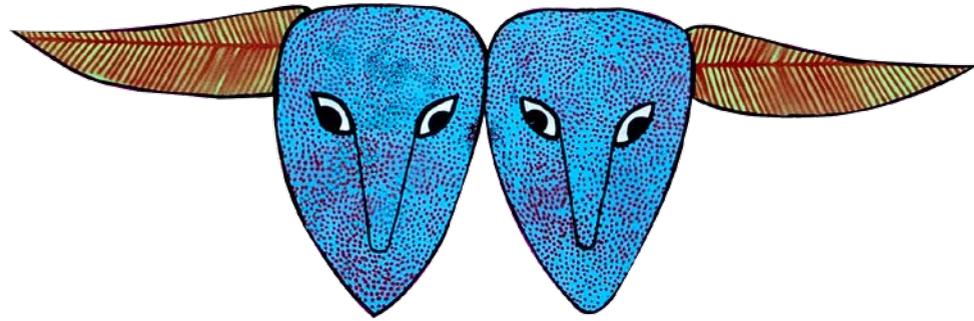
S 29, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
47 x 40 Inch



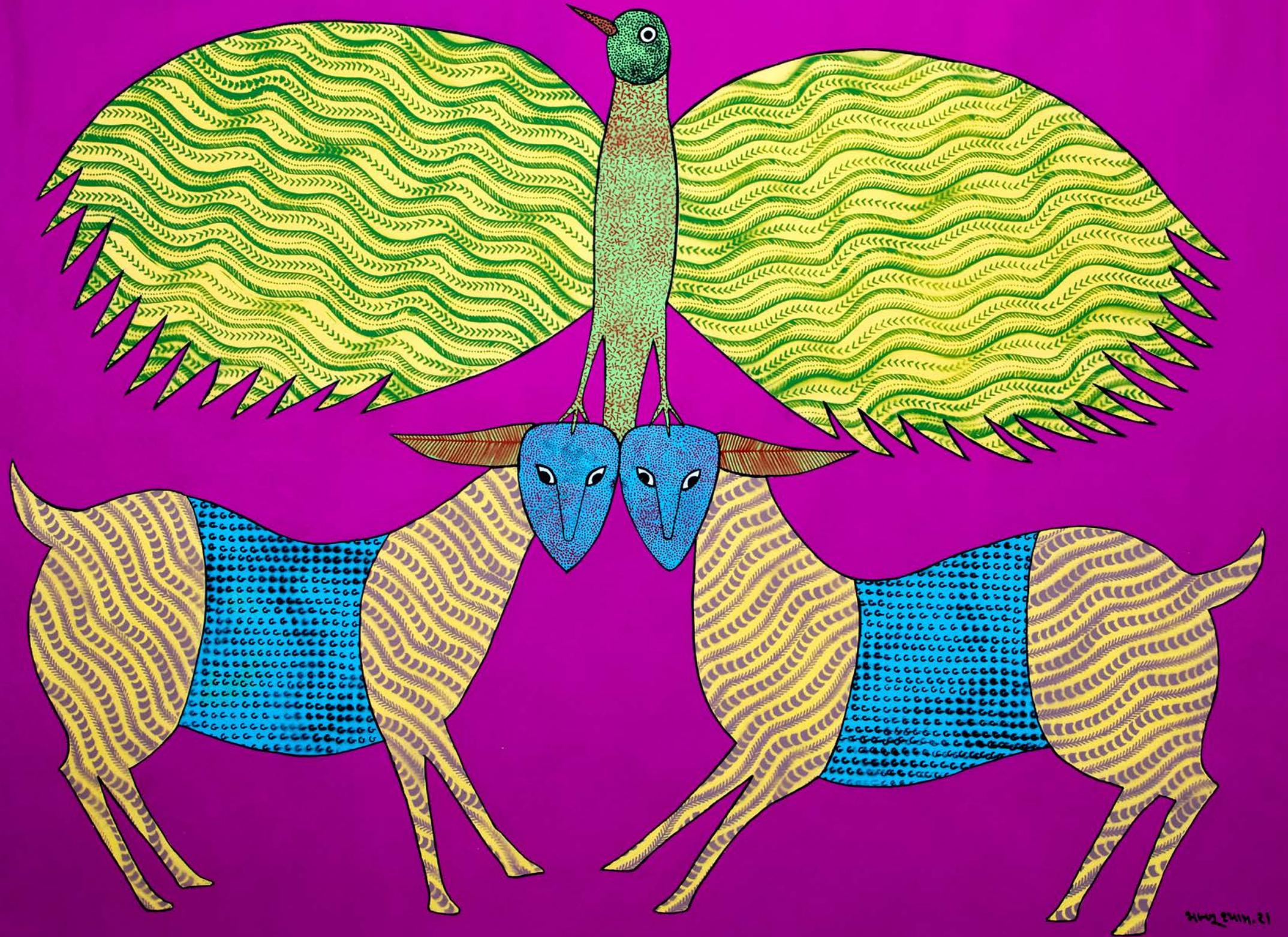
S 16, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and  
Spray paint on  
canvas  
45 x 45 Inch



S 14, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
36 x 45 Inch



S 7, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
59 x 44 Inch





S 12, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
44 x 40 Inch



S 21, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
43 x 39 Inch



S 24, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint  
on canvas  
40 x 45 Inch



S 18, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray  
paint on canvas  
39 x 45 Inch



S 17  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
46 x 41 Inch



S 15  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray  
paint on canvas  
46 x 41 Inch



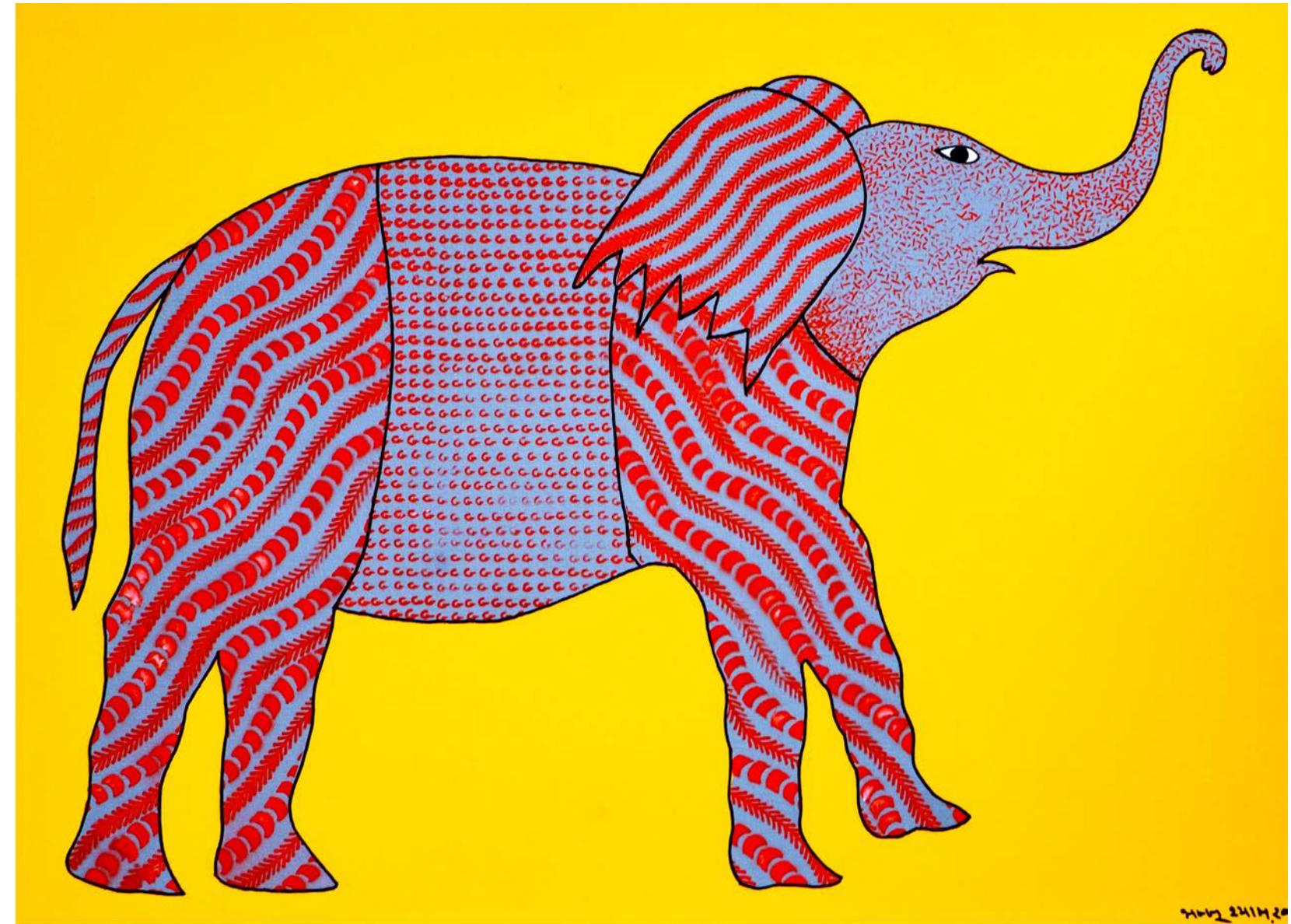
S 13, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
44 x 33 Inch



S 20, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
45.5 x 33 Inch



S 19, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and  
Spray paint on  
canvas  
44 x 44 Inch



S 42, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
30 x 41 Inch



S 26, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint  
on canvas  
45 x 38.5 Inch



S 23, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint  
on canvas  
45 x 38.5 Inch

S 27  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
71 x 47 Inch



S 30, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
71 x 47 Inch





S 25, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray  
paint on canvas  
42 x 38 Inch



S 28, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
54 x 44 Inch



S 31, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
38 x 49 Inch



S 33, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
45 x 36 Inch

S 32, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
68.5 x 33.5 Inch





S 34, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
61 x 38 Inch

S 36, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
65 x 41 Inch





S 22, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
45 x 38.5 Inch



S 35, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
45x39 Inch



S 37, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
71 x 47 Inch



S 46, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
40 x 71 Inch

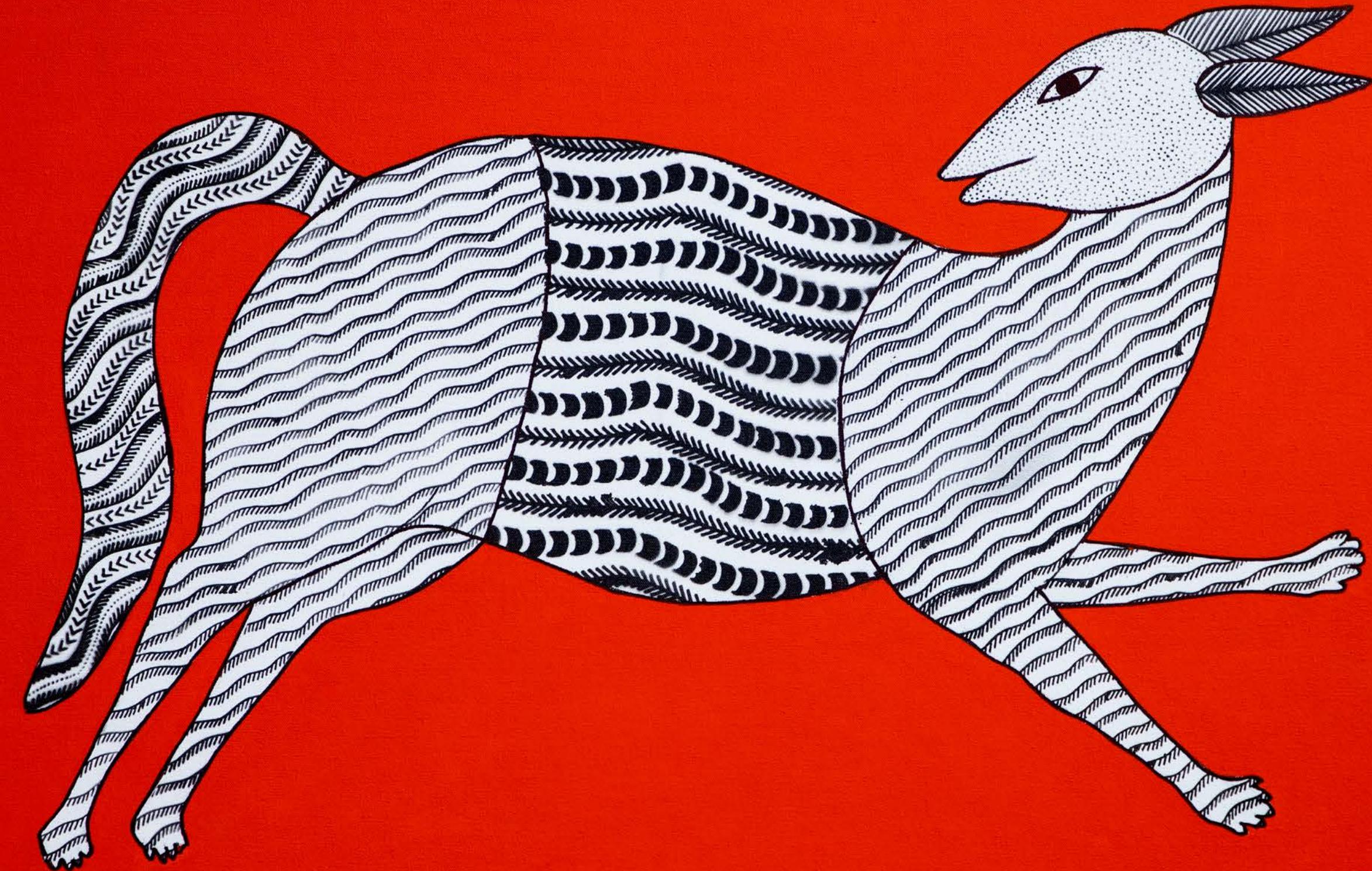


S 39, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
42 x 71 Inch



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S 40, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
34.5 x 59 Inch



S 43, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
27 x 42.5 Inch



S 44, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
34 x 59 Inch



S 41, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
30 x 41 Inch



S 45, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
68.5 X 47 Inch

S 38, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
34 x 43.5 Inch





S 47, 2020  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray paint on canvas  
70 x 48 Inch



S 48, 2021  
Acrylic, Ink and Spray  
paint on canvas  
69 x 71 Inch

# Stories from the forest

Excerpts from a conversation between Bhajju Shyam and Anubhav Nath

**Anubhav Nath:** Bhajju, please tell me about your experience when you first started working with stencils?

**Bhajju Shyam:** At first, I didn't know what a stencil was. St+art Foundation called me and I worked with them for a month. Initially, we were getting a trouble because the color was spreading, then slowly we understood and we got to learn. We realised it's very different from the original work I do. It looks very simple, but there is a lot of effort in it, for each and every time we have to apply butter paper and then cut it very precisely and if one thing goes wrong then the whole painting gets spoiled. But we had a lot of fun in this work and I liked it. Also, we attended Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) and worked with Ojas Art there and learnt how to organize and work with stencils. In future, we will be able to do more such work.

**AN:** We have talked about techniques cutting butter paper, learning to use spray paints, all of them are definitely new things. But what will be the long-term impact of this on your practice, in your aesthetic process and your inner thinking and your journey as an artist?

**BS:** My work is the same, the story remain the same. Like, the 11 x 7 feet work where I made my own face in it. We are people associated with the forest, our ancestors also used to worship animals and

rivers, and protected them as well. Today, the animals that I am making, the idea is that I am also a descendant of them and I am living with them. If I keep doing it, I can do more in it. Right now we were making



more single-single images, but how can we separate it and give it a new look is a new challenge. Like in Singapore, I worked on a painting and how it came as a different work when it was combined with an artist from Singapore.

**AN:** In your solo 'Maa Maatre', there was a grey series which you were a little hesitant to make in the beginning, later there was much appreciation. This series should get the same result as well. Bhajju, we have also been involved in developing this series, so what would you say that according to you is this work more creative or technical?

**BS:** Yes, there is a lot of technical work in this as a stencil has to be sprayed but in this, you have to spray only by applying a stencil, but in this each ear has to be removed, the eye has to be removed, its body has to be removed and you have to work accordingly, you have to take great care. I am telling the truth, many people do not like this work, they say that you have a fine work but it is my own design but the work is getting thicker.

**AN:** Best of all, when we see your wall on Lodi Road, it looks spectacular because of the scale. So first thing, would it be right to compare your stencil and traditional work?

**BS:** No. No, we can't compare; both are different.

**AN:** Looking at this stencil work, it looks like a new Bhajju work.

**BS:** Yes you can say that because this



work is far away from Gond art because in original work we draw one thing at a time but in stencil work you will see only detailing work like big figure, stencil and spray paint which we have never used. I am very lucky that I am able to work with such good people and got involved with them and got a chance to use new things like in grey work, I worked with you and you motivated me to do the work. I focus on detailing and I was really worried that how white over white colour will look? But when we started doing it and exhibited it people from all over place appreciated me and called me to congratulate me. The work that I do for books and for my original gond art work is very different from this stencil work.

**AN:** Bhajju, the one who has to copy your work will do it because people get inspired by the work and try to make similar kind of work.

**BS:** Many people do a lot.

**AN:** Similarly, if anyone makes this stencil set and starts doing his work, then it will not be called Bhajju's work.

**BS:** Absolutely, people like you can understand this thing but a lot of people copy which makes me sad.

**AN:** Bhajju this stencil work is also original.

**BS:** Yes, the stencil work is also original and we have also seen how much hard work is involved in it, so I am just saying that the detailing work is different between the two. It feels great that this new thing has come

out and I feel that I am the first tribal who is doing this stencil work.

**AN:** Bhajju, do you still consider yourself a tribal artist?

**BS:** Many times it happens that we are called both contemporary and tribal artist but many times when we have to tell our tribal stories to people then we feel that we are tribal and making a tribal story in painting, by whose name and work we are known. But people do not look at our work from the point of view that it is the work of a tribal and it is known only by the name of artist But fifteen years ago we were known only as Adivasi (Tribal) and Craftsman.

**AN:** So, How do you feel about this difference?

**BS:** It feels great because today we are able to work among educated artists and we do workshops with those who have studied art and we are able to have an equal status, so we are proud, that we are something.

**AN:** Like you said earlier you were called as Craftsman then you started being addressed as tribal artist so what would you like to be known as an artist in the coming ten years or would you still prefer to be addressed as a tribal artist? What will happen, time will tell but what do you think is more correct?

**BS:** No, see I speak proudly about my tribe and I am always known as an Adivasi. Like I am doing stencil work so I am not a tribal, tribal can do all the work. I want to keep all my tribal stories and traditions to myself because it is because of them I

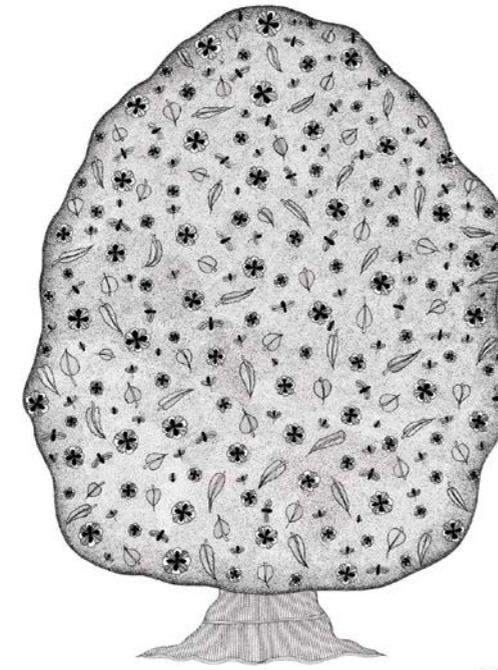
have achieved so many things in life. Even if I do any work in the world, but I am from this society and I will be known by my tribal society.

**AN:** And you are proud of that.

**BS:** Yes, I am proud of this and I like to be a tribal and I am happy that I am a tribal. Suppose even if I were a common man, then I might not be able to roam the country and the world. But now I have become so popular only because of my work and my society and I have gotten recognition.

**AN:** In a Gond community you did a project where a book came out as "Signature" by Tara Book, in which there were famous Gond artists who made their own painting with their own signature, so that book was named Signature that such a design of Bhajju and Ram Singh Urveti has such a design.

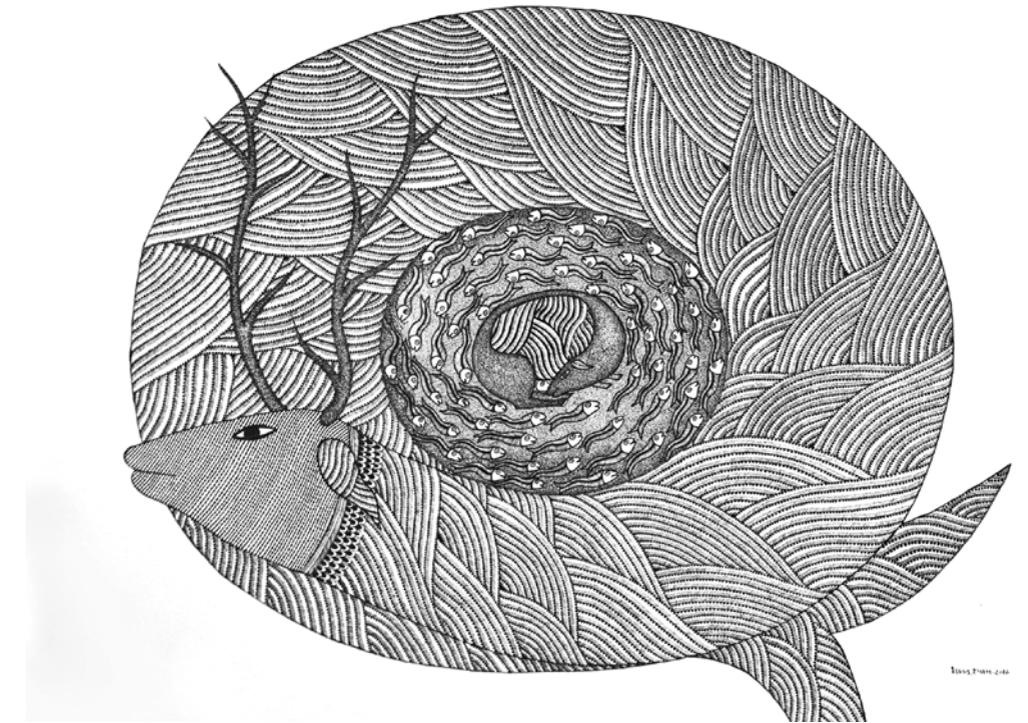
**BS:** When I started painting, I used to work with Jangarh chacha. He always said do your design work don't do like me, if you have to become Bhajju, become Bhajju, if you want to become Ram Singh, become Ram Singh, if you want to become Anand, then be Anand. So he used to speak to everyone, but in the beginning, we used to do a little bit of the same design but we gradually started making our design. So, when I made *London Jungle Book* and *Night Life of Trees*, after that I gave the idea of signature that all the artists should make their own designs and know by their own names, so I gave them the idea. But there



was a discipline at the time of Jangarh uncle, nobody used to copy anyone, they used to make own designs but these days 400-500 artist have emerged and now in the era of internet, where they Google anyone's artwork and copy them. So keeping this in mind, I had made this Signature book, but now some people are following it, some people are not.

**AN:** In the coming time, if there is any other Gond artist who starts doing similar stencil work, not like yours, but whatever kind of creativity they have, they make stencils and use it, then how will you feel?

**BS:** I will not find much of a big deal in it



because after seeing a work every person, keeps on doing something and tries to copy someone's idea, only from that the new idea emerges.

**AN:** Among all the tribal art, St+art Foundation chose Gond Art and in that they chose Bhajju Shyam as the Gond artist Because they knew that Bhajju would be able to do such a thing. It is very possible that not today nor tomorrow, anytime in 2-3 years they will do that same thing with some other artist who may belong to Gond community.

**BS:** Sure, it can happen because there is no such agreement that we will work with

Bhajju only. Those people were already telling me that first we want to do with you, we want to see how it proceeds. They can do it with anyone, there is no big deal in it, any artist can come and anyone can work with them. Sometimes a lot of things happen, sometimes they don't understand each other so it happens and it is not necessary that they will get it done by Bhajju. There are many people in the world who promote different artists and want to work with different artists. It is not that I am the only artist and in the coming days I want and I think someone will do it or get it done.

**AN:** Would like to add something from

your side, which I have not asked you the important thing about this project. Any point that is left and you want to say?

**BS:** What you told us in the beginning that it should be like this, so I thought when we did the exhibition, the first color in it was black and white then color, then you bring it to gray, then it was made of a journey. Now, in the name of a variety, you did black and white, so I like it and it will look a little different according to the color, earlier the 40 works that we have already done. It looks different from the background and this eleven-foot work which I am making will be the biggest and boldest work in which I am very happy. I have something to say in this. In our village lots of people gather, whether it is birth, death or birth of a child. When people join, then they tell lots of stories, some talks about happiness, some talks about sadness and some even says bad things too. So I thought that I can be the old man in the painting who tell stories and that is why I made my face in it.

**AN:** I was trying to ask you, I do not remember that I have not seen any of your paintings before in which you have made your own face.

**BS:** No, this is the first time.

**AN:** As I know your Bana project is going on for which you are very dedicated. so why did you feel that you should make your face in it?

**BS:** I was remembering the same, where these creatures are in the middle of each other but nothing is happening in this. When I was doing the project of Bana, the people of the village come together where an elderly person comes and tells. Then they all question each other that why this happened, why did that happen, then he tells everyone in his own way and it is not necessary that everyone believes in his words and there are some people who also talk bad about him And keeping that in mind, I made my face in a big canvas. At

first I sketched like this but then changed it to make my face. Our elders have said that the animal is different of Shyam, Urveti has a different animal, Khushram has a different animal.

**AN:** Which one is yours?

**BS:** Mine is Sehi (Porcupine) And there are two or three more which I have to ask but I like Sehi most of all. Though I like all animals, but our ancestors have said that Sehi is our main animal. Just like someone's Lion, and other's monkey who protects their nature and living beings.

**AN:** So you think we'll get to see more of your face at work?

**BS:** After seeing this, I can make something else and I can do something new like this. In this painting I have made Sarangi in which before singing or playing it we have to bow to the cuckoo and seek blessings so that our voice remains fine.

**AN:** We are all looking at this project as an experiment, when first you worked with St+art Foundation then with Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) and in the last few days you have worked with Ojas Art. If you could tell us in brief what was the impact on your journey?

**BS:** This work needs a lot of time because this work is time consuming and has a long process. As I am doing this work so can't say much right now. I would just like to say that this is a new work and from past two to three years people are looking at this work as a different art form.

**AN:** Bhajju, have you made a big work on the wall somewhere else?

**BS:** No, I have not made such work anywhere else, I have made only one which is in Lodi Road.

**AN:** Bhajju, Thank you very much for your time.

**BS:** Thank you.



Image courtesy: St+Art Foundation. Photo by: Jay Upadhyay.

**BHAJJU SHYAM** - Born in 1971 in the Gond tribal village of Patangarh, sixteen year-old Bhajju travelled to Bhopal where he became an apprentice to Jangarh Singh Shyam. Bhajju is a well known Gond artist, having exhibited his works all over the world.

His best-known work, *The London Jungle Book*, is a visual travelogue of his 2002 visit to London. The book, published by Tara Books and the Museum of London, was exhibited at the Museum in 2004. Bhajju has been a part of 20 books which have cumulatively sold nearly 100,000 copies.

In 2015, Bhajju received the Master Artist Ojas Art Award and in 2016, he had his first solo show in India at Ojas Art, Delhi. Followed by a solo show in Canada in 2017 and at Bonham's, Hongkong in 2018. Also in 2018 he was conferred with the Padma Shri, one of the highest Indian civilian orders, making him the first Gond Artist to receive this honour.

In 2019, Bhajju had a semi-retrospective exhibition at Bharat Bhavan Museum, Bhopal. Also, he became the first tribal artist to work with St+Art India Foundation culminating in a painted wall at the Lodhi Art District.

Photo by: Pawan Kumar



## Untitled Bhajju Shyam

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Image courtesy: Sit+Art Foundation. Photo by: Jay Upadhyay