

## Binod Shrestha: “Remnants & Ruminations”

BY CHRISTOPHER ATKINS

*Bones make good witnesses. Although they speak softly, they never lie and they never forget.*

—Anthropologist Clyde Snow

IN THE WINTER AND EARLY SPRING of 1990, Nepal's democratic opposition party, known as the United Left Front (ULF), organized citizens, students, and shopkeepers against one of the world's last divine monarchies. Their demands were stated simply: Remove the ban on political parties, form a multi-party democracy, allow all to participate in a transitional government, and guarantee free elections. In the ensuing struggle, from February through April, dozens of people were killed in clashes and mass marches on the monarch's palace in Kathmandu. Binod Shrestha was a young art student living in Nepal at the time and witnessed this revolution firsthand. As part of the student movement, he participated in nonviolent protests against the monarchy.

Shrestha came to the United States in 2002 to study and pursue his art practice. Having witnessed numerous clashes with police, beatings, and murders in Nepal in the early 1990s, he was not immune to events in the U.S. in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, including the subsequent “War on Terror.” Shrestha's art explores the power of violence and the damage it can cause, even years later.

The smooth lines and matte surfaces of the earthenware pots in *Nine Steps* are based on traditional Nepali designs. Each pot rests on a bed of salt, having been pierced or ripped apart in such a way that it becomes a metaphor for violence done against the human body. Like the revolution in Shrestha's homeland, the “Arab Spring” political demonstrations of 2011,

which turned into violent uprisings in the Middle East, were another titanic shift of power from dictatorships to budding democracies. Each dictator's or monarch's fall from power is a violent story of revolution and political upheaval. Seen through the lens of Nepal's revolution and these other current events, *Nine Steps* is a meditation on the violence that erupts during shifts of political power.

The human body is an integral component in Shrestha's work; the plaster and resin hands and feet were cast from the artist's own, and the box forms are based on his physical dimensions. Hands and feet are very sensitive and respond quickly to external stimuli. But as ghostly, disembodied parts they conjure haunting images of dismemberment and displacement, common themes among refugees.

Shrestha's installation sculptures, which are covered with hand-stitched red felt, have a strong physical and symbolic presence. Red stands for the blood that victims of violence spill, and red is a symbol of Communism. In Nepal, red is the color of celebration during the Holi festival, and red is worn by women during religious holidays. This deep red, absorbent cloth in Shrestha's work is a reference to the socio-political and cultural body. With so many links to theology, politics, and the human body, the color red is provocative. The red cedar mulch on the floor of the MAEP gallery can release powerful memories that make quick links across space and time. Cedar, reminiscent of Buddhist temples and



*My Stories Are Your Stories*, 2012 (in progress), resin, plaster, and single-channel video, dimensions variable

rituals, transforms the gallery into a meditative space. And it is this sensation of quiet contemplation that is the connective tissue among the pieces in the exhibition.

During a recent trip back to Nepal, Shrestha recorded testimonies and interviews with people who were injured, and whose relatives were murdered, kidnapped, or are still missing in the aftermath of the country's long civil war. In *My Stories Are Your Stories*, five plaster casts of Shrestha's head have open mouths and closed eyes. The mouth of each contains a small screen that plays videos of the interviews. The videos, in Nepalese, are deliberately not subtitled. It is the body language and intonation of each witness that emphasizes the gravity of their experiences.

In forensic sciences, “[Objects] do not speak for themselves; there is a need for a translation, mediation, or interpretation between the ‘language of things’ and that of people.”<sup>1</sup> Those who study war crimes operate within this context. When

investigating what has happened, it is not the single skull they need. “Those who pursue crimes against humanity need to establish...that the crimes do not simply concern this or that individual, but are in fact widespread and systematic.”<sup>2</sup>

Shrestha's works stem from his broad concept of physical and political violence, which he witnessed in his homeland as well as abroad. His material remnants turn the gallery space into a place for objective rumination.

1. Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele's Skull: The Advent of Forensic Aesthetics*, Frankfurt: 2011, Sternberg Press.  
2. Ibid.

*Christopher Atkins is the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) coordinator.*

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Front, inside far right, and right: *Portrait for Yudishtir* (details), 2012, wood, fabric, plaster, resin, cedar mulch, insulation, tubing and thread, variable installation dimension (3 structures: 76.5 x 24 x 24 in.; 1 structure: 76.5 x 24 x 12 in.)

Flap: *Nine Steps* (detail), 2012, earthenware, salt, ball bearings, dimensions variable

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## Remnants and Ruminations

Binod Shrestha

October 19–December 30, 2012

Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program  
Galleries

### Opening Reception

Thursday, October 18, at 7 p.m.

### Artists' Talks

Thursday, November 15, at 7 p.m.

### MAEP Special Guests

Thursday, December 20, at 7 p.m.

ALL EVENTS ARE FREE, OPEN TO THE PUBLIC.

For more information about the artists,  
this exhibition, and MAEP, visit:

[binodshrestha.net](http://binodshrestha.net)

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