



## PRESS RELEASE

### ONLINE EXHIBITION AT BENURI.ORG

## **Shanti Panchal: A Personal Language of Painting 2007-2018** **Opening 24 July 2020**



Left to right: *The Roots or Route to Helmand*, 2010; *Brexit*, 2018; *The Refugee*, 2014.  
All watercolour on paper © The Artist

In these challenging times of Covid19 and a world that is increasingly locked down and isolated, the digital exhibition has taken on an altogether more urgent and significant role. As we cannot leave our homes as we would normally wish, to visit galleries and museums, except via a screen, the online experience can provide some degree of visual and intellectual nourishment. Of course, engaging with a digital artwork will never be a replacement for the actual lived experience of a real work 'IRL' – the glorious texture, depth and exactitude of colour, emotional heft, the intimacy of a tiny woodcut in a darkened cabinet versus the knockout grandeur of a huge gestural painting in a vast white gallery space.

Yet for many artists, the practice of self-isolation and social distancing is something that was commonplace before the global pandemic; it is how many artists function in their studios, when they do not belong to large studio groups or have an array of assistants making their work. Being solitary is often the daily condition of an artist such as Indian-born, Shanti Panchal; the situation he needs to be in, in order to make his very particular paintings.

In this online exhibition, the gallery's first digital offering devoted to a contemporary émigré artist, Ben Uri has taken the opportunity to showcase a dozen works by Shanti, a first-generation migrant to England. Born in Mesar, a village in Gujarat, north west India, Shanti studied at the Sir JJ School of Art, Bombay, before arriving in England on a British Council scholarship to study at the Byam Shaw

School of Art from 1978-80; he has now lived and worked in London for more than forty years. Produced in the decade since his two-person show with Julie Held, *Regard and Ritual* (Ben Uri, 2007) which toured to the Eldon Gallery, Portsmouth University, these dozen, carefully selected images showcase Shanti's extraordinary watercolours. Shanti remains remarkably 'true' to his chosen medium, working in a limited palette but often on a scale greater than we expect of watercolour. In each work, the saturated colour which fills every carefully drawn form is so perfectly judged, and the pigment applied so generously, that it seems impossible that the medium is what it is.

Along with each visual essay of balanced colour harmonies, enigmatic narratives confront the viewer. Who are these figures and why, when they are framed together, do they often exist so separately? Some are Shanti's closest family members, such his two elder sons who were young soldiers serving with the British army in Helmand Province in Afghanistan. Other figures are not actual portraits, but rather, they are emblematic – providing the artist with a way into some of the most pressing issues facing humanity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: slavery, refugees and migrants, disability, terrorism, the role of women, and Britain's place in a new European order. There is a sense that the particular can stand for the universal and that we each recognise, within Shanti's figures, something of our own experiences.

An unusual departure for Shanti, *Watering Cans* is a beautiful homage to Giorgio Morandi, the vibrant colours associated with India replaced by the softer tones reminiscent of those of the Italian master whom Shanti so admires; the vessels themselves were spotted by a public fountain in a Provencal village, though the final painting was worked up in a London studio under a dull grey sky. In the final image, *Brexit*, two figures turn away from the viewer, the picture surface split by the muted white of the cliffs of Dover. A darkened sun broods over the pair; the smaller one glimpsed only through his hand resting on the back of his taller companion – for Shanti, the big man represents a Europe that has overshadowed a smaller Britain. Who knows how this uncertain relationship will play out. Originally created as a visual response to Brexit and the artist's own sadness at an imposed bureaucratic distancing, today, when separation is so much more than political, the power of Shanti's images is even greater.

The exhibition's focus on a contemporary immigrant experience continues the Ben Uri Research Unit's ongoing mission to critically examine and effectively tell the story of the lives and works of émigré artists, Jewish and non-Jewish, who have enriched the British visual cultural experience since 1900.

**Editors notes:**

For high resolution images and further information, please contact the co-curator of the exhibition, Rachel Dickson at [racheld@benuri.org](mailto:racheld@benuri.org)

Ben Uri Art Society was originally founded in 1915 by Jewish émigré artists/craftsmen in London's East End ghetto, and much of its exhibition history and permanent pre-eminent and core collections (numbering some 800 works) reflects trajectories shaped by narratives of migration, identity and belonging.

The exhibition also coincides with South Asian Heritage Month 2020.

