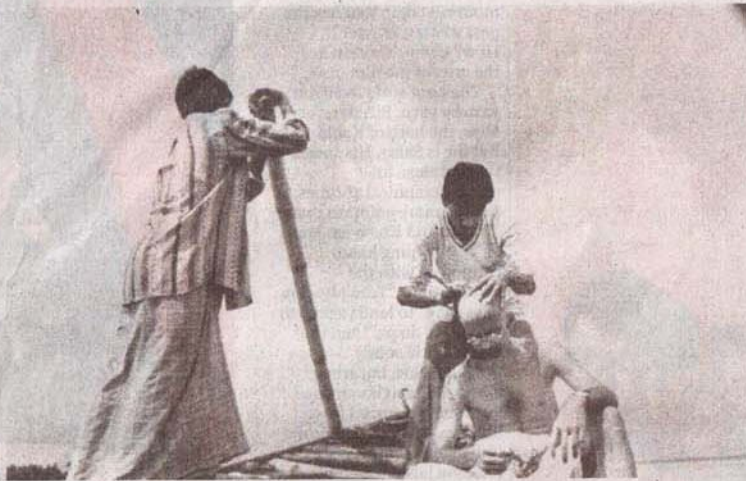


Outside the boundaries

Ashish Avikunthak calls himself a film artist who tries not to belong either to the film or the art world. **Shailaja Tripathi** speaks to the artist.

It's not possible to confine Ashish Avikunthak to any boundaries. He intends it that way. He exists outside; yet the zone can't be nebulous. He has been making films for the past 20 years. So he calls himself a film artist. His self-funded works aren't released in cinema halls, they are shown in major galleries, museums and film festivals across the world. Last year, Art Review, an international contemporary art magazine based in London, named him one of 30 Future Great artists of 2014. Born and brought up in Jabalpur and Kolkata, he teaches film media at the Harrington School of Communication & Media, University of Rhode Island.

Apeejay Arts in collaboration with Chatterjee and Lal, is having his retrospective "Deathlessness" which showcases films made by him over the last 16 years — "Et cetera", "Katho Upanishad", "Vakratunda Swaha" and "Rati Chakravayuh" at Apeejay Arts in the city. Avinash in a Skype chat



▲ OF TEMPORALITY AND INDIVIDUALITY Stills from Ashish Avikunthak's works

discusses his work, influences, and what encourages him to exist at the margins.

On his retrospective in Delhi

I have had retrospectives in India earlier. NCPA Bombay exhibited my black and white photographs 16

years ago but I don't do photographs anymore. Experimenter in Calcutta has shown my work, Chatterjee and Lal in Bombay has shown my work, Aicon in London, but it's for the first time that Delhi is having a retrospective. There are two feature led films and three

other smaller works.

On being a film artist and not a filmmaker

Unlike a filmmaker, film artist isn't thinking about audience. I work like a poet and an artist irrespective of market considerations. I think boundaries have become more rigid than ever



before and I that's why I am deliberately outside these boundaries. None of my films have been commercially released. One film "Katho Upanishad" which was given a censor certificate, was also problematic. So, I don't go to the Censor Board either. Nor do I want any awards because I don't want to be legitimised by the State, particularly from a right-wing government.

On art galleries providing him the alternative space to showcase his work

Twenty years ago a film



made by Shyam Benegal could have had a limited theatrical release but that market space which is now dominated by multiplexes is only interested in entertainment. The market thinks that my space can't be shown in their space because it's not interested in any work which is serious. So, the only space available and welcoming to artists like Amar Kanwar, CAMP and Raqs, is galleries and museums. A gallery is a private space not governed by the State.

On still being an

Rati Chakravayuh, 2013

105 minutes
On a lunar eclipse midnight, in a desolate temple, six young newlywed couples and a priestess meet after a mass wedding. They sit in a circle and talk about life, death, beginning, end and everything in between after which they commit mass suicide.

Vakratunda Swaha, 2010

21 minutes
Vakratunda Swaha is a film made over 12 years. It begins as a requiem to a friend who passed away and ends as a contemplation on death and ritual. Using the footage of the late artist Girish Dahiwalé (1974-1998) filmed in 1997 as the kernel, the film is a meditative exploration on the place of dying and resurrection in our times.

Katho Upanishad, 2011

59 minutes
It is an adaptation of a 2500-year-old Sanskrit treatise of the same name, where Yama instructs Nachiketa about the path towards enlightenment. Structurally, the film is a triad with three chapters — the quest, the dialogue and the final liberation.

Et cetera, 1997

33 minutes
Et cetera is a tetralogy of four separate films made between 1995-1997. They seek to examine the various levels at which the reality of human existence functions. In these films, specific ritual exercises have been focused on and their movements, contemplated upon, by studying the dynamics of their etymologies.

outsider to the art world

None of my works have been sold to collectors. I am reluctant to be part of neo-liberal market economy because just about everything is on sale today, even relationships. Everything is measured by money and this market economy is ultra-oppressive. And I would like to resist that. I try to escape that because market economy destroys individuality. I live at margins.

On various influences

I am a Punjabi, born and brought up in Calcutta. In my 20s, I was in Bombay and a political activist for Narmada Bachao Aandolan. As an undergraduate, I studied social work. At Stanford, I studied cultural anthropology. And my work carries traces of all these.

(The retrospective is on at Apeejay Arts, B-II/41, Mohan Co-Operative Industrial Estate, Mathura Road, till May 31)