

# Rebuilding through art

## The efforts of an artist collective in the aftermath of the Great Quake have left a lasting mark on the affected people of Thulo Byasi

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Thirty-year-old Kesari Suwal was hesitant when artist Sheelasha Rajbhandari put forth the idea of knitting self-portraits during the knitting workshop currently being held every Saturday afternoon at Thulo Byasi, Bhaktapur. She had always thought that only gods, kings, or celebrities had the liberty of turning their faces into art. But when a fellow knitter in the workshop knitted her portrait as a sample piece for the project, Suwal was overjoyed. And the way Rajbhandari puts it, Suwal had felt "important" and "empowered" that day. Like Suwal now, the other women in the workshop, too, can't wait to complete the project.

ArTree Nepal, an artist collective—made up of Rajbhandari, Hit Man Gurung, Mekh Limbu, Luvkant Chaudhary and Subas Tamang—has been conducting weekend art workshops for the children and women of Thulo Byasi since the first week of this year's May. This initiative is one among the many that artists of the country have been running around Nepal. While many artists have been involved in rehabilitation and resettlement programmes, ArTree has been primarily relying on art activities and workshops to help people overcome the trauma that they have sustained since the Great Quake.

"After the April 25 quake, we were travelling around Kathmandu and documenting everything. It was about four or five days after the quake that we reached Bhaktapur at night," says Gurung. "The next day we went to Thulo Byasi where a fellow artist, Rakesh Yakami, had lost his home. We planned to help carry out immediate relief work there. We initially planned to spend the day in the area, but ended up settling there," he adds.

"The children were in a state of panic. Some were angry, others were depressed. Our biggest concern was the fact that they had nothing to do," says Rajbhandari. "So we started out by conducting morning workshops for children," she adds.

After spending some time with the community there, the art group decided to create a longer-term project that involved the community. In the past couple of months, the artists have invited other visual artists, art students and performing artists to conduct a series of programmes ranging from upcycling waste material into art to styling the children's hair into Mohawks—

artist Sujan Dangol spent a Saturday in the area, trimming the children's hair into trendy hair-dos. The children, Gurung says, were later seen posing for the camera, flaunting their new looks.

"As we spent more time with the community, we started to realise what the people actually needed," says Gurung. "And since we were documenting everything, we thought it was important for us to stick around and witness growth."

What started out as relief work has now turned into individual projects for the artists—all of which come under ArTree's community art effort 12 Baisakh. Recently the collective has also launched Camp Hub in which artists part of the group, along with other independent artists—13 in total—create site-specific art in different spaces of Thulo Byasi.

For example, Tamang, along with members of the community, has created Basi Byasa: a space

sheltered under a roof made of water bottles where people can come together and talk and share. The artist is now busy talking to the people there, collecting their stories—through visuals and text—that will be installed into the space itself.

While Tamang's work brings together different stories of the people who share a common space, Rajbhandari's work is more about building a platform for expression for the women in the community.

"A majority of the women in Bhaktapur knit and I thought it was a good idea to explore that asset of the community to make art. Besides, when collaborating with a community, it is always good to explore something that the people already relate to," says Rajbhandari.

According to the artist, almost all the housewives in Thulo Byasi take and complete knitting orders of items like woolen gloves and beanies. Rajbhandari, however, has been trying to introduce other practices and techniques of knitting. She has been bringing in experts and encouraging the women to refer to 'step-by-step' guide books as well. She has also been taking books on contemporary art to the workshop sessions in an attempt to broaden the participants' creative horizons. She says it has not been easy, though.



tures and they were scandalised. They thought the male figures were inappropriate and didn't even let the younger ones view the pictures," says Rajbhandari.

But the artist hopes that the workshop sessions will help most of the women overcome fear and to try and break the social constraints that bind them. This response from the women fuels the artist's hopes. Sapana Basukala, for example, after learning about one of Rajbhandari's earlier works—made out of papier maché—went on to prepare her own material to try her hands at the medium.

Basukala, who is now living in a rented room after the destruction of her house, says that the workshop has been immensely helpful for her to cope with the calamity.

"After the quake, we were just sitting around with nothing to do. And all that would come to mind was the disaster. Everybody was in fear and stress. But because of the workshops, we had something to do. It helped kill dreadful time," says Basukala.

Since most people who were living in the camp set up at Thulo Byasi have now migrated to other areas, started living in rented spaces or moved in to their homes, the workshops will soon end.

But for somebody like Basukala, the experience and impression seems to have been lasting.

She says: "I've been knitting for some time, but I knew very little of all the things that could have been made. Through the workshops, I have learned a lot, and I will try and make use of what I have gained in the future as well."

Camp Hub will be open for public viewing at Thulo Byasi from September 18.



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