Between Myth and Revolution: Magic Realism in Kiran Manandhar's Socio-Political Art

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Abstract

This research studies the issue of Magic Realism in the selected paintings of Kiran Manandhar in connection with the democratic revolution in Nepal. Through a series of political and apolitical paintings, Kiran Manandhar explores the relationship between violence and peace. Kiran's political paintings stand on behalf of people's rights and question any kind of corrupt, crooked, and autocratic forms of government. He uses inner psyche and his magical forms like vibrant brush strokes, bold colors, dynamic lines, and distorted shapes to express the pain of human suffering under oppressive regimes. The spontaneous and fluid application of colors, the interplay of pencil and brush sketches, and the merging of defined figures with abstract patches create a playful visual art. Though not entirely realistic, his work produces a powerful articulation of political and emotional themes. This research contributes significantly to critical discourse and academic study by examining how Manandhar employs Magic Realism as a political tool in his art. The study serves as a foundation for further exploration of the connections between artistic expression and socio-political movements in Nepal.

Keywords: Magic Realism, Political Paintings, Expressive Technique, Art and Politics

Introduction/Background

This study examines six selected paintings by Kiran Manandhar that document the everyday life of Nepalese people during the post-civil war period through the lens of magic realism. Manandhar's artworks resist any absolute interpretation as they reveal the complex realities beneath Nepal's social reality. While his art has been celebrated for its aesthetic power, the specific role of magic realism in conveying post-war trauma remains underexplored. This study aims to redress the balance by examining the way his juxtaposition of myth and reality constitutes the critique of Nepal's socio-political scene.

Magic realism, originally a literary mode associated with Latin American fiction (Faris, 2004), manifests visually through the realistic depiction of fantastical elements. Faris's (2004) framework helps decode how Manandhar's paintings blur the boundaries between the tangible and the symbolic. His 2002 painting, *Destination Medium* (see Figure 1), typifies this approach, portraying a mythic female figure in hyperrealistic detail. Ali (2015) describes the work as a chromatic extravaganza painted with effortless ease as he dabs and swaths his canvas with color and with his hands. This interplay of vivid color and psychological tension underscores how magic realism operates in Manandhar's work, not as escapism, but as a lens for opposing collective trauma.

The study focuses on visual analysis through magic realism to debate that Manandhar's fragmented, layered forms reflect Nepal's unsettled post-war struggles. The portrayal of women and children in distress, for instance, reflects documented disparities in wartime suffering (Subedi, 2018). Subedi's (2018) research aligns with the artist's observation on migration, displacement, and gendered violence. As Bowers (2004) notes, magic realism originated as an attempt to "capture the mystery of life behind surface reality", a goal that resonates with Manandhar's portrayal of Nepal's hidden wounds.

Subedi (2018) characterizes Manandhar's work as "fluid, mobile, experimental and yet deeply rooted in political thought," noting distinct phases in his artistic evolution. This characterization captures the dynamic tension in Manandhar's oeuvre, where formal experimentation coexists with jagged socio-political observation. The paintings merge opposing forces: turbulence and serenity, hope and despair; reflecting the artist's quest for development and equality through symbolic patches of color and form. These visual paradoxes mirror Nepal's own contradictions during its transitional post-war period, where progress and trauma coincided.

Scholars have approached Kiran Manandhar's paintings through diverse critical lenses that reveal the complexity of his artistic vision. Subedi's analysis (2018) explores the psychological magnitudes of Manandhar's work, particularly his recurring female figures, which serve as powerful psychological symbols. These figures express the human psyche through the delineation of figural forms, creating a world of charm as well as experience,

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representing them. This psychological interpretation becomes especially poignant when considering how Manandhar's canvases merge the artist's consciousness with his subjects, as Subedi (2018) notes that Manandhar creates human characters in their mental and physical worlds, but mainly mental, because each canvas is a world of the artist as well as the human characters as conceived in the art. These observations suggest that Manandhar's work operates as both personal catharsis and collective portrait, with the female figures serving as channels for psychological truths about war's impact on Nepali society. Shrestha (2016) highlights how Manandhar's artistic practice engages with spiritual traditions, noting that he paints harmony with the five elements: Air, water, fire, earth, and metal. He worships art, and for him, his creations are the offerings and homage to society and the Almighty. This spiritual framework contextualizes the transcendental quality in Manandhar's depictions of war trauma, suggesting that his work functions simultaneously as aesthetic expression and sacred practice. The amalgamation of classical elements (panchamahabhuta) provides a cultural vocabulary for understanding how his paintings reconcile the material and spiritual dimensions of post-conflict experience.

The motif of childhood in Manandhar's work emerges as particularly significant through Rajen Manandhar's commentary (The Kathmandu Post, 2017). The artist's own words reveal a profound connection to childhood innocence: "their language, walking and doing whatever they like without social cares makes him feel that he would have been the happiest person if he could have behaved like an innocent baby" (The Kathmandu Post, 2017). This reflection provides crucial insight into his poignant portrayals of war-affected children, suggesting that his depictions of youth represent both a lost ideal and a site of potential healing. The child figures in his paintings thus become multivalent symbols, simultaneously representing vulnerability, resilience, and the possibility of renewal.

Gupto (2019) contests conventional art-historical approaches to Manandhar's work through a post-structuralist lens. His perspective becomes especially relevant when examining the artist's magic realist techniques, as he argues that interpretation in art is an open-ended process rather than a search for fixed meanings. This theoretical stance aligns with Manandhar's own resistance to singular interpretations, where layered imagery and symbolic ambiguity invite numerous identifications. Gupto's approach helps explain why magic realism serves as such an effective framework for analyzing Manandhar's paintings; both share an inherent resistance to definitive interpretation. This study builds upon diverse perspectives while employing magical realism as its analytical framework. Zamora and Faris (1995) describe magic realism as one that explores and transgresses boundaries, while Chanady (1985) emphasizes its characteristic lack of explicit judgment regarding the reality of depicted events. Together, these views highlight magical realism's ability to navigate complex realities without resorting to reductive binaries, a quality that makes it particularly effective for analyzing Manandhar's intricate representations of war and their

psychological implications. This framework allows simultaneous engagement with both the tangible trauma of conflict and its more surreal psychological reverberations.

Magic realism was first conceptualized by German critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe post-expressionist painting (Bowers, 2004). Over time, the term has become closely associated with Latin American literature, illustrating its adaptability across artistic and cultural contexts. The mode encompasses creative works that merge realistic depictions with magical or supernatural elements, where the nature of the "magic" shifts according to cultural beliefs—from Christian mysticism to Indigenous cosmologies (Zamora & Faris, 1995). Borges (1964) interprets this style as a means of uncovering the hidden wonder within everyday life, transforming ordinary reality into something extraordinary while preserving realism. This blending of the real and the surreal makes magical realism particularly appropriate for representing post-war Nepal, where daily existence links tangible suffering with moments of psychological and spiritual disorientation. The style emerged in part from colonial encounters, during which European observers often perceived foreign cultures through supernatural or mystical frameworks (Gupta, 2018). Contemporary authors such as Rushdie and Ghosh extend this tradition by blending realistic detail with elements of folklore and fantasy (Chandra, 2020), illustrating how magical realism evolves across cultural contexts while maintaining its central tension between the real and the marvelous. This adaptability helps explain why Manandhar's Nepali context, with its rich spiritual and folkloric traditions, serves as a space for the expression of magical realism.

1. The Destination

Kiran Manandhar's painting of a Nepalese woman carrying a basket represents magic realism's ability to infuse ordinary reality with symbolic meaning. The striking use of red, both visually arresting and emotionally charged, transforms a common scene into what Roh might describe as an encounter with the extraordinary within the everyday (Bowers, 2004). Bowers' analysis of Roh's original conception of magic realism helps us understand how Manandhar's work functions within this tradition, where heightened attention to color and form reveals hidden dimensions of reality. The basket serves as both a literal object and a powerful metaphor, representing the dual burdens of physical labor and societal expectations borne by women during Nepal's civil conflict.

This dual representation aligns with magical realism's characteristic blending of realistic detail with symbolic resonance. The woman's traditional dress roots the image in cultural specificity, while the surreal treatment of color and form elevates it to universal significance, demonstrating magic realism's capacity to make local experiences speak to global audiences. The painting's stylistic approach reflects what Van Wallenghoms identifies as Manandhar's unique position between modernist precision and postmodern experimentation (2018). Van Wallenghoms' observation contextualizes Manandhar's artwork within broader art

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historical movements, showing how he synthesizes different aesthetic approaches to create his distinctive magic realist style. Its photographic attention to detail connects to German magic realists like Dix, who depicts reality with such intensity that it discloses deeper truths (Zamora & Faris, 1995), while its emotional rawness and symbolic distortions suggest a postmodern sensibility that questions objective representation. Zamora and Faris's comparative analysis demonstrates how Manandhar's technique draws on historical precedents and contemporary approaches in magic realist art.

Figure 1: *The Destination*

The tension between exact duplication and creative adaptation reflects the main contradiction of magic realism because it presents extraordinary elements as ordinary while showing ordinary things as extraordinary. The power of this work comes from its exact balance between documentary and allegorical elements, which present a Nepalese-specific experience that connects to worldwide themes of resistance and survival. The painting achieves its effect by blending magical elements into reality rather than using dramatic effects, according to Borges (1964), when he discussed magical realist works. Borges' insight explains the subtle yet powerful effect of Manandhar's approach, where the integration of symbolic elements into realistic scenes creates a profound emotional impact. It does so without resorting to explicit commentary. The method enables viewers to explore the exceptional characteristics of daily routines while showing how magic realism reshapes our perception of everyday life.

Kiran Manandhar's *Fight for Democracy-II* demonstrates the political power of magic realism through its method of combining actual historical facts with symbolic, abstract elements. The black-and-white background division in this work reflects Zamora and Faris's (1995) description of magic realism through their phrase "an art of radical juxtaposition". The theoretical framework enables analysis of Manandhar's musical decisions which establish a dialectical interaction between the white space that represents collective hope

and the black area that stands for state violence. The wounded female figure transforms into what Chanady (1985) terms an "irreducible element," simultaneously a specific victim and universal symbol of civilian suffering. The figures of Manandhar function through different levels of interpretation according to Chanady's theory of irreducible elements which enables them to preserve their historical references while achieving mythic meanings.

2. Fight for Democracy- II

Figure 2: *Fight for Democracy*

Fight for Democracy presents the April 2006 democratic movement in Nepal through visual elements that show political violence by using broken body parts and limited color schemes, and symbolic representations. Manandhar uses magic-realist methods to transform rifles and gestures and shapes into everlasting symbols that represent both resistance and trauma, which makes the local fight understandable to people all over the world.

The body fragmentation technique in Manandhar's work shows similarities to Picasso's Guernica, but he achieves Roh's (1925) "mysticism of materiality" through his use of black and gray tones. The original concept by Roh gained new depth through Bowers' interpretation, which shows how Manandhar's minimalistic approach makes the political trauma physically experienced by viewers. The rifles' menacing presence exemplifies magic realism's capacity to make institutional violence feel both hyperreal and surreal, fulfilling Borges's (1964) notion that "the fantastic should stem from reality's minute particulars". Borges demonstrates how Manandhar achieves the painting's eerie effect through his careful depiction of the rifle barrel position and the sari's precise creases.

Like Roh's original post-expressionists, Manandhar rejects decorative aesthetics to expose what González Echevarría (1977) calls "history's unhealed wounds." González Echevarría's phrase perfectly captures how Manandhar's work makes visible the ongoing

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psychological impact of political violence. The painting's power derives from its magic-realist balancedocumenting the events of April 2006 while transmuting them into timeless protest imagery—confirming Faris's (2004) assertion that "political magic realism makes trauma legible through strategic distortions." Faris's analysis provides the critical vocabulary to understand how Manandhar's formal choices, his distortions of scale, and his symbolic color scheme serve both aesthetic and political purposes. Kiran Manandhar creates his artwork by combining black and red palms with egg-shaped forms and aggressive symbols, which matches Faris's (2004) description of magic realism's method for showing political trauma through "strategic distortions of reality".

3. The Chaitra -24

Manandhar's painting *Chaitra-24* captures the stormy events of Nepal's April 2006 democratic movement, translating historical truth into a visual language that merges political commentary with aesthetic novelty. The artist avoids decorative realism through magic-realist techniques, which show both physical and metaphorical elements of political resistance. Manandhar uses distorted shapes and a few but meaningful colors and opposing images to show how Nepalese democracy stands against challenges while maintaining its core values.

The painting serves three distinct functions at once by documenting reality through allegorical methods and protesting against current issues. Viewers must actively participate to experience how political violence affects both individual minds and social communities. The artwork connects Nepal's local conflict to worldwide discussions about power dynamics and human rights defense.

Figure 3: Chaitra-24

Faris's concept helps illuminate how Manandhar's formal choices, the exaggerated hands, abstracted egg forms, and jarring juxtapositions - serve not merely aesthetic purposes but function as deliberate political commentary. The limited palette - which the artist describes as "blind to color...I can see black and red" (Site, 2007) - reflects Roh's concept of "chromatic essentialism" (Bowers, 2004), where color reduction intensifies symbolic meaning. This chromatic restraint, as analyzed through Bowers' interpretation of Roh, demonstrates how Manandhar's selective use of color creates heightened emotional and political resonance, with black representing oppression and red symbolizing both bloodshed and revolutionary potential.

The egg form, representing Nepal as a fragile democratic embryo, operates as an irreducible element, simultaneously biological and geopolitical. Chanady's framework explicates how Manandhar's egg motif counterattacks singular interpretation, functioning at once as a symbol of vulnerable new life and the perilous state of Nepal's democratic institutions. The barbed wire and nurturing hands form a visual contrast that demonstrates Zamora and Faris's (1995) idea that magic realism emerges from "spaces of radical contradiction" through their depiction of Nepal's fight for democracy. The theoretical viewpoint shows how Manandhar applies contrasting elements in his work to demonstrate the basic political conflicts that emerged during Nepal's shift to democracy.

The media of painting itself becomes theoretically significant. Manandhar's transition from canvas to house walls mirrors Gupto's (2019) analysis of South Asian artists "breaking formal containers to match political urgency". Gupto explains that Manandhar's choice to paint on walls emerged from a regional artistic movement that developed during political turmoil because traditional art methods could not represent current social conditions. The bloodied handprints and dates show Borges's (1964) "palimpsestic violence" theory about history, while the fetal democracy matches Subedi's (2018) interpretation of Manandhar's work, which shows "societal gestation periods". The conceptual framework of Borges enables readers to grasp how Manandhar employs dates and handprints to build historical layers, yet Subedi's analysis demonstrates how the egg motif symbolizes Nepal's social evolution.

4. Crying for Peace

This given work follows Picasso's *Guernica* in how it turns the April 2006 events into universal protest symbols through magic realism's dual purpose of documentation and defamiliarization (Faris, 2004). Faris shows how Manandhar manages to combine precise historical details with universal themes by using modified shapes and symbolic components to connect Nepal's democratic movement to worldwide political freedom battles.

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The pre-democracy painting by Kiran Manandhar shows a white bird singing against red and black colors, which Carpentier (1949/1995) described as *lo real maravilloso*, where political situations unite with symbolic depiction (Zamora & Faris, 1995). The concept shows how Manandhar uses his artistic style to show Nepal's social and political problems by combining realistic elements with magical components, which creates a distinct Nepali magical realism. The white bird, positioned above violent red tones, visually enacts Roh's (1925) principle of "transcendent realism" (Bowers, 2004), suggesting peace ultimately supersedes conflict. Here, Roh's theory helps explain how Manandhar's imagery moves beyond mere documentation of strife to evoke a higher, almost spiritual resolution. The composition continues Manandhar's previous work, *Fight for Democracy-II,* according to Subedi (2018), because he shows how political unrest creates both hope and terror at the same time. Subedi's observation reinforces how Manandhar's art consistently negotiates the tension between despair and optimism in Nepal's democratic struggles. The bird's vulnerable position between protective and threatening hands reflects what Faris (2004) identifies as magic realism's characteristic irreducible contradiction, here representing Nepal's fragile democratic aspirations. The artistic method of Faris demonstrates how Manandhar maintains opposing elements in his paintings, which replicate political transition uncertainty.

Figure 4: *Crying for Peace*

While European surrealists manufactured marvels through artistic will. Manandhar's bird emerges organically from Nepal's historical moment, much like Latin America's *marvelous reality* grew from its unique sociopolitical conditions. This distinction underscores how Manandhar's symbolism is deeply rooted in local experience rather than abstract artistic experimentation. The color symbolism—red for bloodshed, blue for spiritual yearning, black for oppression—creates what Chanady (1985) describes as a system of signs that are simultaneously literal and transcendent. Chanady's analysis helps decode how Manandhar's palette operates on multiple levels, conveying both immediate political violence and

deeper existential meaning. This aligns with Manandhar's own artistic evolution during the 2006 movement, where, as Site (2007) records, the artist found himself compelled to work beyond canvases, his vision reduced to revolutionary essentials he could see black and red. Sites' account demonstrates how Manandhar's aesthetic choices were directly shaped by the urgency of Nepal's democratic struggle, grounding his symbolism in lived reality.

5. Flying to Heaven

Kiran Manandhar's *Flying to Heaven* exemplifies magical realism through its depiction of two earthly figures ascending to heaven while maintaining realistic textures and brushwork. Kiran Manandhar's *Flying to Heaven* portrays the transcendence of earthly beings into a divine realm, merging spiritual symbolism with painterly realism. Through luminous textures and balanced composition, the painting embodies magic realism's harmony between the ordinary and the mystical. The painting draws from Hindu cosmology while using universal spiritual elements to show how ascending to higher levels becomes a spiritual practice that connects human belief with divine freedom and eternal spiritual connection. The combination of supernatural elements with physical reality demonstrates Franz Roh's vision for magic realism in post-expressionist art because he believed fantastical components would naturally emerge through realistic depiction (Roh 1925/2013). Roh's framework helps situate Manandhar's work within a broader artistic tradition that merges the miraculous with the mundane, emphasizing how the painting's ethereal subject matter is grounded in technical realism.

Figure 5: Flying to Heaven

The painting's spiritual themes connect with Alejo Carpentier's theory of lo real *maravilloso americano* (the American marvelous real). Carpentier (1949/1995) argued that Latin America's unique history and culture produced an inherent magical reality distinct from European surrealism. The work of Manandhar draws its inspiration from Hindu

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cosmology, yet it shares similarities with Latin American mystical concepts, which exist as fundamental elements of the natural world. Carpentier's concept shows how Manandhar's painting, which is based on Nepali religious beliefs, creates a natural fusion of awe and reality that exists in postcolonial magical realist art.

The artwork unites human perception with reality, which stems from the fundamental literary principles of magical realism. Spanish American fiction matter-of-factly presents extraordinary events, according to Flores (1955). Flores' insight clarifies how Manandhar's heavenly ascent operates within the same narrative logic—the supernatural phenomenon is rendered with such vivid realism that it demands acceptance as part of the depicted world. The method matches magical realism's core principle because it unites magical elements with a realistic setting without providing any explanations (Bowers, 2004). Bowers' definition demonstrates that Flying to Heaven achieves its effect through its artistic mastery of painting, which creates a visual experience that connects viewers to its spiritual content without using symbolic or metaphorical elements.

6. Day and Night

Kiran Manandhar's *Day and Night* uses binary oppositions between black/red and male/ female and light/dark to create meaning, which follows Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist principle that meaning emerges from opposing elements inside a system (Saussure 1916). Saussure's linguistic framework helps explain how Manandhar's visual language operates through juxtaposition, where each element gains significance through its relationship to its opposite. The painting shows a circle split into two sections, which represents a dualistic perspective of the world because the black section stands for night and death, and mystery, and the red section stands for day and passion, and vitality. The combination of opposing elements shows how magical realism blends together opposing components into a single cohesive whole.
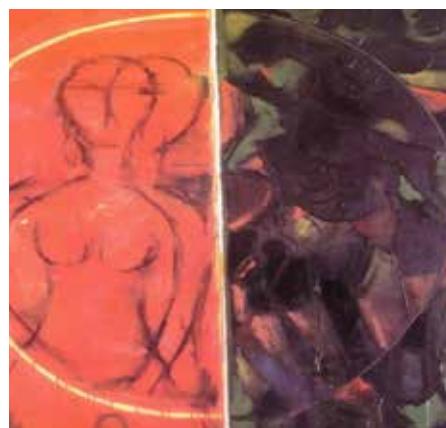

Figure 6: *Day and Night*

The artist presents a nude female figure in front of a concealed male figure to symbolize gender through the way the female body reveals some aspects while keeping others hidden. The technique mirrors Jorge Luis Borges' magical realist style because he creates stories that challenge established meanings (Flores, 1955). Flores' analysis of Borges' work illuminates how Manandhar similarly challenges binary perceptions, using the female form to explore themes of visibility, power, and cultural identity. The combination of realism and myth in Manandhar's work resembles Borges' approach because she uses the female nude to express both physical reality and existential as well as cultural ideas.

The painting establishes itself within magical realism through its use of color symbolism. Red serves as a symbol for both romantic affection and fatal aggression, which demonstrates Alejo Carpentier's lo real maravilloso concept that extraordinary elements exist within normal life according to his 1949 work (Carpentier, 1949/1995). Carpentier's concept clarifies how Manandhar's use of red transcends mere aesthetic choice, instead embodying the paradoxical nature of human experience. The black half of the painting generates feelings of fear and superstition, which resemble Franz Roh's magic realism approach that presents supernatural elements through common settings (Roh, 1925/2013). Roh's theory proves that Manandhar achieves metaphysical exploration through his artwork by transforming everyday objects into symbolic elements.

Manandhar's technique, spontaneous brushwork, mixed media including acrylic, charcoal, collage, echoes the modernist experimentation of artists like Picasso and Pollock, yet his focus on Nepalese socio-political undercurrents grounds his work in a localized magical realism. The artist employs abstract symbols to show traumatic experiences instead of direct war representations, which resembles Gabriel García Márquez's narrative style (Bowers, 2004). Bowers' comparison to Márquez highlights how Manandhar's stylistic choices serve a deeper narrative purpose, using fragmentation and ambiguity to reflect the complexities of post-conflict Nepalese society.

Manandhar uses spontaneous brushwork and mixed media with acrylic and charcoal, and collage to create his art, which shows the modernist experimentation of Picasso and Pollock, yet he bases his work on Nepalese social-political themes through his localized magical realism approach. The artist employs abstract symbols to show traumatic experiences instead of direct war representations, which resembles Gabriel García Márquez's narrative style (Bowers, 2004). Bowers' comparison to Márquez emphasizes that Manandhar employs literary techniques to construct a narrative framework that mirrors the sociological characteristics of post-war Nepal.

The research investigates how artist Kiran Manandhar from Nepal uses magical realism in his paintings to depict the social and political changes in Nepal during the civil war and its aftermath. The research analyzes six main works from Manandhar to show how he uses

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realistic methods alongside symbolic and surreal components to fight against oppression and show collective pain. Through his paintings, Manandhar portrays Nepal's democratic struggles by using symbolic elements like split color fields and injured figures, which align with Franz Roh and Alejo Carpentier's theories about magical realism as a form of storytelling that exposes hidden realities through planned distortions. While Manandhar draws inspiration from Western modernists Picasso and Pollock and Latin American magical realism, he bases his work on Nepalese Hindu cosmology and his experiences after the war to establish a local form of the genre. Through his artistic approach, he creates visual parallels to Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic theory by using structural opposites such as black and red and male and female figures, which represent the dual forces of violence and peace and traditional and modern values in Nepal. His art techniques combine various materials through collage and newsprint transfers and spontaneous brushwork to create an intense emotional connection between personal mental states and historical collective experiences.

Manandhar achieves aesthetic innovation through his magical realism, which simultaneously delivers political statements by transforming Nepalese struggles into worldwide tales about resistance and hope. His work exists within the worldwide magical realist tradition, but he develops his own artistic style for South Asian art. Future research could explore comparative analyses with other post-conflict magical realist artists.

Conflict of Interest:
We declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research. The study was conducted independently, without any financial, personal, or professional influence from the painter Kiran Manandhar, art institutions, or any affiliated organizations. All interpretations and analyses presented in this work are solely the author's academic perspectives, developed through critical engagement with existing scholarship and the artist's publicly available works.

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