

Ranjit Dahiya: Decorating Walls in the City of Dreams

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Several years ago, while riding in the back of a black and yellow taxi from the airport into central Mumbai, my attention was caught by a burst of color in the skyline and a gigantic mural adorning the façade of the MTNL building. An image of someone famous that I was unfamiliar with, but was clearly important enough to be the face of what the driver told me was the country's largest mural at 20,000 sq.

That was in 2014, and since then Indian cities have exploded with assorted wall painting projects, street art festivals and initiatives. These include political propaganda, grassroots community and civic initiatives, and gentle reminders about hidden infrastructure, like subterranean pipelines.

Art in the streets has become part of an everyday social construct that everyone can partake in. By creating works on walls and leaving a mark where they live, people are engaging in a dialogue with one another using available surfaces, materials and other technologies that comprise layers of the city.

What people choose to re-imagine their walls and public spaces with differs, as does the form, scale, materials used and messaging. This direct engagement in shaping everyday life has often felt radical, particularly when it is participatory or self-initiated—simply because there is no freer or more equal public realm than a street.

Decorative wall art has a long history in the Indian subcontinent, historically patronized by beliefs and wealthy elites as a way of documenting and representing their lives. Over time, it has shape-shifted into a form of art for all, adorning public surfaces and representing varied ideas and images. A specific form of engaged people's art theater in the streets has been a form of creative resistance such as by the Sahamat Collective—a precursor to much newer and

performative forms of street art—which include truck art.

While murals are considered a decorative or ritualistic art tradition, the street art extensions like place-making which one increasingly encounters in the public realm have emerged as a discussion between the streets, people and ideas. As an art genre this includes performances, interventions and painted murals as a form of advertising and social marketing.

The Bollywood Art Project (BAP)

Street art in India, like elsewhere, is increasingly more than two dimensional decoration—it is performative: social, civic and often political—what many might consider contemporary propaganda in addition to art.

The monumental mural I saw in 2014 piqued my interest enough to discover the Bollywood Art Project—a one-man initiative as homage to the legacy of moving images produced in the city. Since 2012, Ranjit Dahiya has single handedly been pursuing his dream as an artist through this project, while memorializing film stars creating a uniquely Indian pop art form. Through his murals — of assorted sizes — he has created a tribute to the city of dreams and films while simultaneously constructing an identity and legacy for the city of Mumbai.

Home to Bollywood and to many actors and actresses, these superstar celebrities and their stories have a cultural influence that extends far beyond the borders of Mumbai or India. Visually, however, there are few indicators of this heritage; and this is something, which Dahiya has sought to address:



Art in public spaces has the power to bring people together. | Bollywood is that key link that connects people from all walks of life.

PAINTING BOLLYWOOD

Source: <https://www.instagram.com/bollywoodartproject>

“Mumbai is Bollywood and Bollywood is Mumbai... you can’t separate the two. I thought of giving the city what it is best known for. In 2013, the film industry completed 100 years of existence, so this (was) my tribute to the industry, as well.”¹

His art, he says, is a celebration of nostalgia. He has even painted a wall in North Carolina, USA for a fan of actress Madhubala.

The Manufacture of Images

Bollywood, it turns out, is not that different from Hollywood in terms of how media and politics engage with one another. Bollywood films are India’s largest and most popular entertainment product and export, and one of its most powerful social forces given its mass appeal and emergence from the corporate and commercial heart of the country. These films, regardless of language and simply by celebrity appeal and narratives rooted in emotion, resonate with people across the world; an interesting legacy of the non-aligned movement. Popular blockbuster productions often informally bolster state or national ideology through celebrity influence. And the success of these films hinges greatly upon their mass appeal, which includes controversial, non-controversial and popular political positioning. Broken up by synchronized dance sequences and catchy tunes, these films that live a life far beyond the film screen. But perhaps the most lasting and interesting aspect of these images is that they offer a subliminal realm of fantasy which people yearn to escape to. The lack of text is certainly relaxing in a country ridden with illegal ads.

And yet Bollywood is not demonstrative of the diversity or the plurality of India—and is in fact a tool for mass communication often leveraged as influential propaganda. What has become clear is that while Dahiya creates in celebration, his works may be analysed entirely differently in terms of theory².

The Politics of Image-Making

BAP is one-man’s extension of the state’s cultural machinery using non-intrusive, non-aggressive and entertainment-based appeal.

It is worth noting politically motivated films are being used as a tool to mobilize young voters to back specific political parties, as well as bolster popular opinions related to domestic and foreign policy. Not unlike the ways in which Hollywood manufactures consent and merges education and politics with entertainment, Bollywood often tows the line of the government due to its immense mass appeal.

As the long arm of Indian soft power and cultural policy, it has included narratives that are supposed to communicate educational national and international cultural exports: sex education, in *O.M.G 2* (2023) and menstrual hygiene for women in *Padman* (2018). But the spectacle of image-making seems to offer a thin veneer for the realities of development in the country, particularly the persistent inequities. The communication is also uni-dimensional.

Ranjit’s project began because he was a massive Bollywood fan; by painting these images he released the stars from the confines of cinemas onto the walls of a city. He painted his first wall in 1993, of Goddess Saraswati, and has single-handedly constructed an overarching and hugely popular urban identity. One that is increasingly rare given the inequities experienced in cities across the country and of political polarization in general.

He is part of the broad tradition of Indian artists who were also sign-painters, like MF Husain, who started out working as a film billboard painter.³ Although they are replicated, they are often highly imperfect, and are testament to diminishing hand-made works.

1 - <https://m.rediff.com/movies/special/he-paints-bollywood-in-bollywood/20150226.htm>

2 - As Vamsee Juluri has noted in “Bollywood Nation” (2013) film stars are often perceived as being almost god-like. He argues that cinema serves almost like a national culture in a country with such a plurality of languages, geographies and religions.

3 - <https://www.saffronart.com/artists/m-f-husain>

Content, Scale and Visibility: Propaganda

Some of Dahiya's works depict famous film scenes, while others are copies of the unusual graphics used in actual film posters—stylistically similar to Husain. He uses tools like a brush or a roller, and not a spray can. An insight, which situates his work in a tradition, referred to as '*jugaad*'⁴ rather than what is often termed tactical urbanism in Western countries. According to some sources, he uses shoe polish brushes to apply color on the walls: "it becomes easy to fill the surface with it."⁵ In recent years, Dahiya's works have extended beyond representing film stars, to include portraits of mega cultural icons who perhaps (and I have been unable to confirm this) also live in the city: iconic singer Lata Mangeshkar, cricketer Sachin Tendulkar and the father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke⁶—whose face adorned the MTNL building. Phalke's film career reportedly fell victim to "the emerging technology of sound film".⁷ The introduction of films known as *talkies* meant that the career of a man who had been a pioneer in the film industry suddenly became obsolete. His professional life was in fact marked by failure to embrace the technological transitions in his field.⁸ To people in Mumbai, he remains a source of immense prestige and an inspiration to many that live in the city and know about him. And thanks to Dahiya's monumental tribute, people who did not know about him before will explore his legacy in a low-tech way.

Dahiya has said that his murals of India's cultural stars are a way of beautifying the streets of the city, generating a sense of pride and relatable identity. His portraits of megastars Rishi Kapoor, Amitabh Bachan, Waheeda Rahman and more recently a portrait of actor Irfan Khan. But, it is the massive, almost hyperbolic scale at which he operates that make these large murals feel somewhat like overwhelming propaganda.

Unlike the Mexican mural tradition of social realism, which depicted everyday people—this appears to have more in common with the Russian socialist realist tradition. Art on the streets in India appears to be more about fantasy — popular imagery and political propaganda with some decorative and civic interventions. But the content and form are worth analysing.

In India, cities have always presented surfaces as a canvas which has been relatively benign, until the last decade: the emergence of stencil art, protests in the streets and other creative interventions are heralding a different context for street art development, one that is worthy of its own analysis.

A City Caught Between Fantasy and Reality

In the field of street art, it is a given and accepted trope that sometimes the desire to share work in public is driven by ego, political agenda or marketing — which are often proportional to the size and scale of the works that are created. And even if not scaled to the artists' vision, it may correlate to the power of those supporting its production. In this case, the scale and replicability of propaganda-like images appear not simply be motivations, but are bolstered by audiences appreciating a form of popular culture.

Wall art is not simply beautification and aesthetic appeal—it has been found to increase footfall, which supports local economies and businesses; makes places safer, more accessed and prone to better maintenance. It builds a sense of community on a small scale, is therapeutic in terms of the ways in which it can appeal to ones' senses and can generate pride of place among people.

Dahiya's deeply devotional painting practice appears to emerge from an adoration of both Mumbai and Bollywood.

4 - <https://www.archdaily.com/109318/jugaad-urbanism-resourceful-strategies-for-indian-cities>

5 - <https://m.rediff.com/movies/special/he-paints-bollywood-in-bollywood/20150226.htm>

6 - From: <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/xwVhaYIDKW9tKg>

7 - From: <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/dadasaheb-phalke-a-brief-history-of-the-father-of-indian-cinema-rajaharishchandra-8575271/>

8 - From: <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/dadasaheb-phalke-a-brief-history-of-the-father-of-indian-cinema-rajaharishchandra-8575271/>

His works are striking especially since due to technological advancements, including its related misinformation and disinformation, reality is increasingly not a shared experience. It is in fact more or less fractured and polarized.

Political propaganda has historically tended to be a polarizing force and a façade to reality. Dahiya's work appears to attempt to overcome these polarizations by uniting people in the city; his works are perhaps better understood when situated within a broader field of media architecture — a combination of aesthetics, art and design that is responding to politics, architecture, urban planning, digital media.

Murals are intertwined with the uptake of technological tools, engaging in civic and urban processes, and making visible the socio-political realities that bind us to the places we live in and inhabit. And ultimately, BAP's murals created a visual identity representation of reality with mass appeal.

More: www.bollywoodartproject.com

Dadasaheb Phalke was known for the ways in which he put women and their representation on screen. In a similar way, Dahiya appears to be painting women actresses to seemingly bring visibility and acceptance on a street-level in a country where crimes against woman, particularly in the north, are a daily reality. Whether or not the inspiration behind these popular murals and the analysis of their content serve an intended purpose remains to be seen in a country of such diversity. The purpose and consequence of murals are, like anywhere, difficult to summarise reductively but in this case are worth analysing for the ways in which their impact is extended using the tools of media.



Source: The BAP website