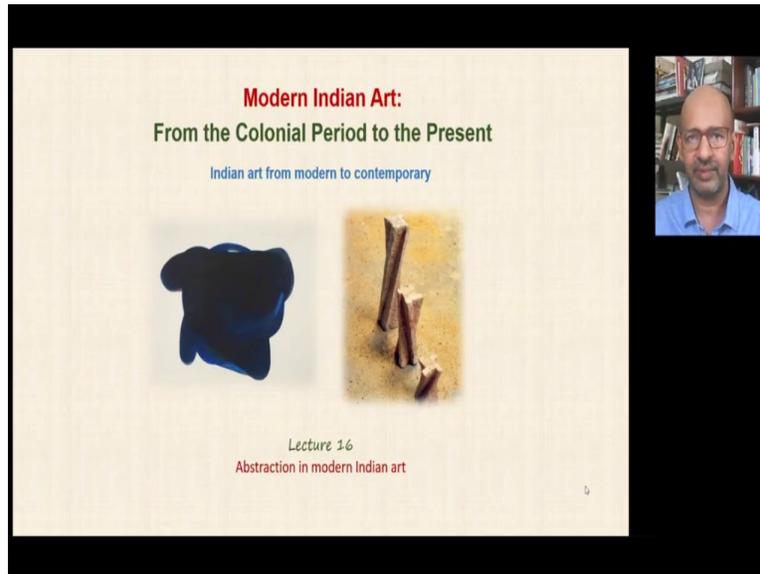


**Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present**  
**Professor Soumik Nandy Majumder**  
**Department History of Art, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan**  
**Visva-Bharati**  
**Lecture - 16**  
**Abstraction in Modern Indian Art**

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Hello viewers. Welcome to MOOCs online course on Modern Indian Art: From the Colonial Period to the Present. Today in the sixteenth lecture of this course we are going to pay attention to something very special that was emerging as a very definitive trend or a stylistic tendency during the post independent period and slowly that particular tendency evolved into a very strong notion of Indian modernism. That particular category generally is known as abstraction or abstract art.

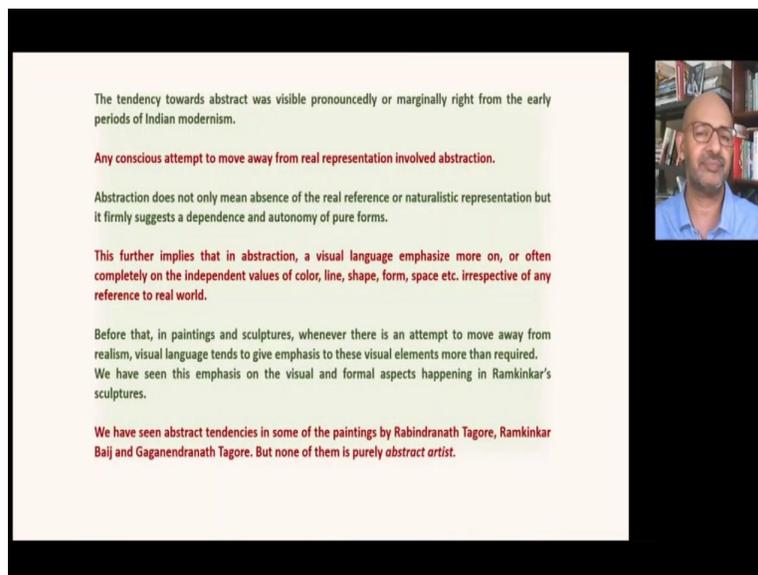
Now, needless to say- right from the beginning of the modern art in India and particularly from the time Bengal school artists were getting pretty active, we have seen not any pure abstract art but sporadic reflections or sporadic presence or attempts at abstract techniques.

Now, these abstract techniques never created any space or any reason for any of those artists to become a completely abstract artist or an abstract painter. It is only later from the 1940's and particularly for example from the Bombay Progressive Group of artists we have seen somebody like Raza- later evolve into one of the major abstract painters of India who started his career from the 40's.

So, basically it is from the artists of the 1940's that we once in a while get to see somebody like Raza, somebody like Ram Kumar who would eventually become a completely abstract painter. Whereas, in the slightly later decades we have artists like Ganesh Haloi, Nasreen Mohamedi, Jeram Patel and others who almost from the beginning of their career showed a tendency towards abstraction and later on these artists became very well known as pure abstract painters.

So, let us look at the development of this tendency and also let us try to pay attention to the salient features of abstract art during this period in India and also let us understand the significance and value of abstraction in modern Indian art.

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The tendency towards abstract was visible pronouncedly or marginally right from the early periods of Indian modernism.

**Any conscious attempt to move away from real representation involved abstraction.**

Abstraction does not only mean absence of the real reference or naturalistic representation but it firmly suggests a dependence and autonomy of pure forms.

**This further implies that in abstraction, a visual language emphasize more on, or often completely on the independent values of color, line, shape, form, space etc. irrespective of any reference to real world.**

Before that, in paintings and sculptures, whenever there is an attempt to move away from realism, visual language tends to give emphasis to these visual elements more than required. We have seen this emphasis on the visual and formal aspects happening in Ramkinkar's sculptures.

**We have seen abstract tendencies in some of the paintings by Rabindranath Tagore, Ramkinkar Bajj and Gaganendranath Tagore. But none of them is purely abstract artist.**

So, abstraction in modern Indian art- we must admit is not something that happened accidentally or incidentally. It was a rather conscious and deliberate aesthetic choice on part of some of these very well known artists but the tendency towards abstract was visible either pronouncedly or marginally right from the early periods of Indian modernism.

Any conscious attempt to move away from real representation involves abstraction. After all if we are to define abstraction or abstract art, this should be made clear right at the outset that we are looking at this term abstract art or abstraction not as something vague or meaningless or beyond our capacity to decipher.

That is anything that is illegible, something that you cannot recognize, you cannot understand is often categorized or classified and more often than not very derogatory negatively as abstract art. This is not the way we are trying to define abstract art in the context of the history of modern Indian art. We want to say put it very simply that the entire world of art actually can be divided into a couple of very basic categories.

A large part of what we call art in the whole world always tries to represent something, maybe an object, or a figure, landscape, tree, anything, but the attempt is to represent which means these artists who belong to this category of representation, they end up drawing or sculpting or creating a form which are actually identifiable or recognizable by the viewers as something which it represents.

Therefore, it becomes rather easy for us to identify a drawn or a painted tree on a canvas or a paper as a tree. We can identify a human being as a human being. However different they might look between one painting or the other. But on the other hand in abstract art this whole issue of recognition or identification is completely or almost absent.

I mean that while you are looking at an abstract art and if you keep asking what does this mean, this is still a reasonably good question. There is no harm in asking what does it mean. But to ask what does it represent could be a very very wrong question in front of an abstract art because more often than not an abstract painting or an abstract sculpture actually does not represent quote unquote anything. It may convey feeling. It may convey many other things.

It can even convey ideas, concepts but it never tries to represent. Therefore, abstract art is also known as non-representational art. It is also known as non-objective art because there is no object representation involved in abstract art. If it happens at all, it is incidental. There are quite a few examples of abstract art in modern Indian art where you might notice 1 or 2 elements which look like a tree over there or like a bird or like something else but the rest of the painting remains very pronouncedly abstract.

So, abstraction does not only mean absence of the real reference or naturalistic representation but it firmly suggests a dependence and autonomy of pure forms. So, therefore in abstract art -artists,

if he or she is an abstract painter would like to enhance the qualities, the visual and formal qualities of line, color, shape, space, pattern just like that.

I mean when you look at a color or a shape or a form in abstract art, you are supposed to enjoy as color, as shape, as form, as very dynamic and agitated lines or a very silent line whatever it is. Not in terms of what these lines, color, forms represent but in terms of what they actually are right in front of you visually on the canvas. So, this is what we mean when we use the term autonomy of pure forms.

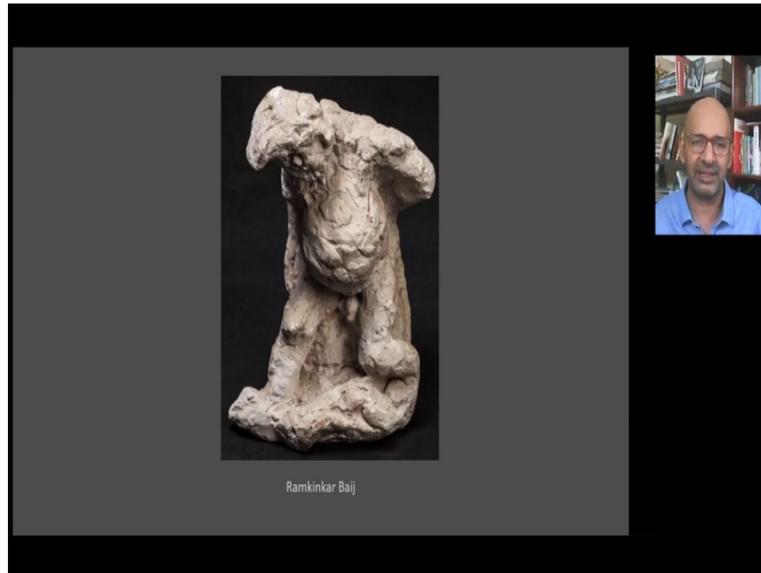
This further implies that in abstraction a visual language is emphasized more on or often completely on the independent values of color, line, shape, form, space, etc. irrespective of any reference to the real world.

Now, before that in paintings and sculptures that is before the advent of pure abstraction- in paintings and sculptures whenever there is an attempt to move away from the realism, visual language tends to give emphasis to these visual elements more than required.

We have seen this emphasis on the visual and formal aspects happening in Ramkinkar's sculptures or even in Rabindranath Tagore's paintings. A brilliant flame of colors which actually do not represent flame or a riot of colors or a burst- an explosion of colors, lines, forms in Ramkinkar's paintings which sometimes do not represent anything but they express maybe joy, maybe some kind of agitated moment, maybe the dynamics of nature- anything. So, none of them whom we just mentioned whether it is Ramkinkar Baij or Rabindranath Tagore, none of them was actually or categorically an abstract artist.

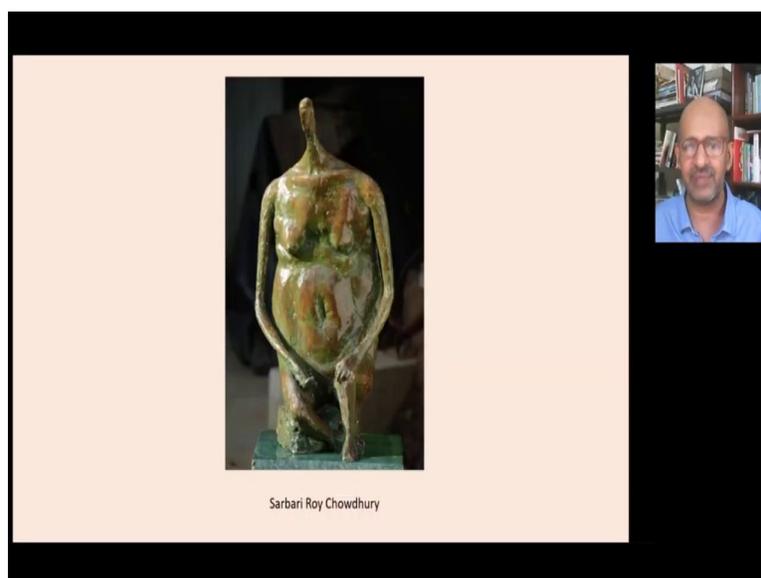
But in their works we do find traces of abstraction. We have seen these tendencies in Rabindranath Tagore's paintings and also in Ramkinkar Baij, Gaganendranath's paintings but none of them is purely abstract artist in that sense.

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So, in this sculpture by Ramkinkar Baij though the image is clearly that of a figure, nothing else but a figure but you can already see something very interesting happening in this sculpture wherein you can see the thrust is less on the identity of the figure and more on the texture of the sculpture, on the volume of the sculpture, on the way the sculpture has been handled by the pressure of the hands and the fingers- that is the formal aspects, the technical aspects that is the quality of the material, the medium is often emphasized in abstract works of art.

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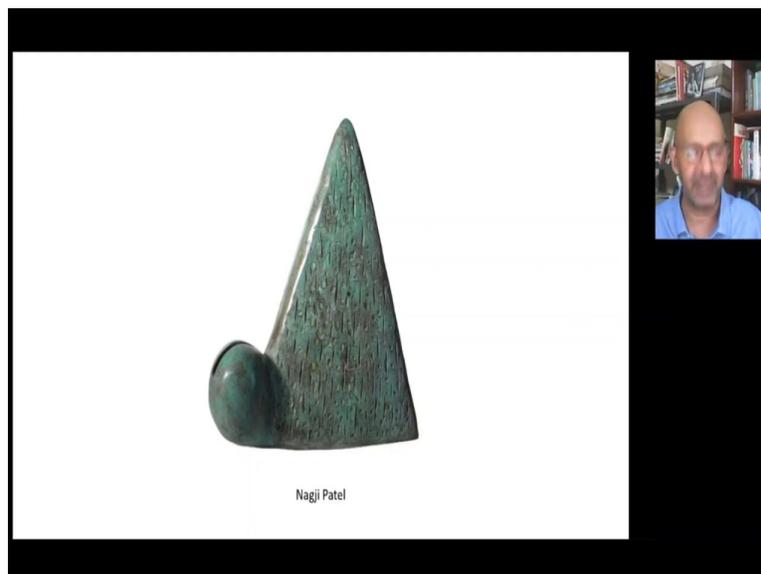


For that matter this sculpture by Sarbari Roy Chowdhury again, no matter what this sculpture clearly shows a tendency or at least a deep understanding of abstraction. We see this kind of tendencies also in innumerable examples of folk art and folk sculpture, tribal art and tribal sculptures in our country.

Now, in this particular sculpture we are looking at right now by Sarbari Roy Chowdhury has a clear identity. Everybody can understand that this sculpture represents the figure of a human being and with all probability a female human being. But that is only a recognition or identification. But if you keep looking at the sculpture then this particular identity of the sculpture gives way to your appreciation of the formal shape, the pattern of the sculpture, the strange kind of anatomical deviation of the sculpture.

In other words if you are enjoying this sculpture at all you are enjoying its stylization. That there is a tremendous freedom in the way the sculptor has played with the proportions of the human body which does not at all conform to the real anatomy. Now, this freedom is possible only when the artist in question actually has an understanding of abstraction and therefore in his works abstractions show through.

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Now, we have people like Nagji Patel, for example, a very famous sculptor from Baroda, in whose works you can clearly see a form which deviates from all representational norms and

creates a form that is in one word abstract. So, you can find associations with something else- maybe a mountain, maybe a snail but that is not the point.

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Most important aspect or aspects of this kind of sculpture is how the different shapes and forms relate with each other, create a harmony or a relationship between each other and in totality they arrive at a visually and aesthetically meaningful or very impressionable form.

So, this visual meaningfulness, this aesthetic significance beyond the matter of recognition, beyond the matter of identity is the most important aspect of abstraction or abstract art.

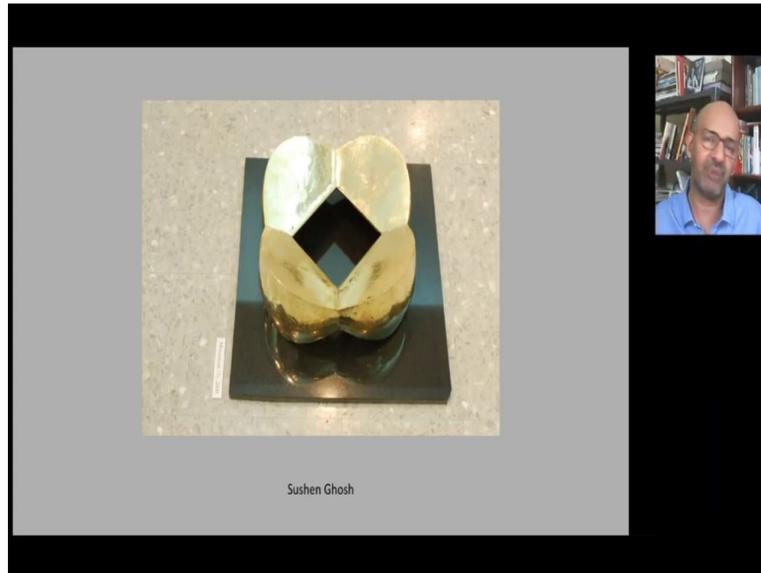
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Look at this by Nagji Patel. Again, while looking at these sculptures it can remind you of snail, it can remind you of a reclining human being. But truly speaking, these are associative kind of recognitions and these identities are pretty far stretched also and the whole fun of looking at these kinds of sculptures is really not to find out the identity but to find out the inherent beauty of the forms without any identity.

So, abstract art emphasizes that aspect, that a sculpture or a painting can be enjoyed, can be appreciated, can be understood, without caring for the identity, without going for the recognition. If these sculptures or paintings do have any recognition at all, it is incidental.

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But here we have another very important sculpture from Santiniketan who was also a student of Ramkinkar but he decided very early in his life to give up figurative sculptures, human sculptures and explore the non-figurative, the non representational sculptures- that is abstract. So, Sushen Ghosh is playing with different units of form.

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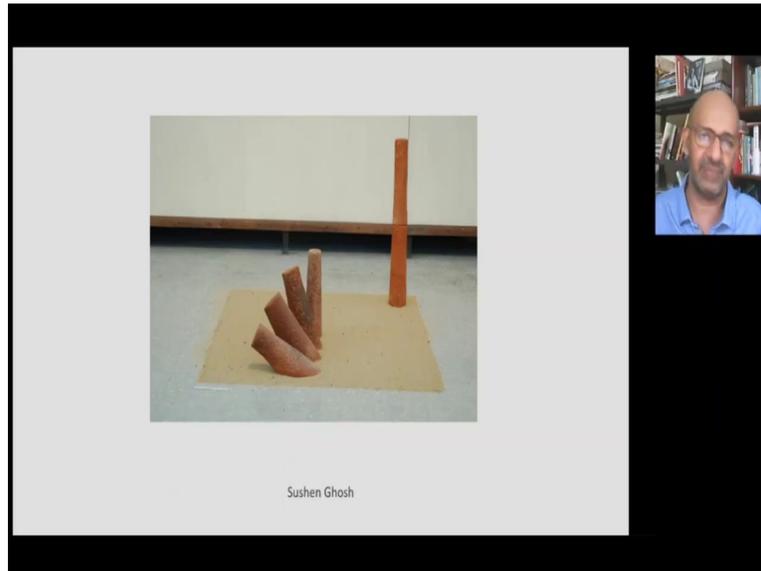


In this sculpture you can see that not only he further divides his sculpture into small, smaller, a little bigger and very big units, but the way he arranges these units to form one single special construct, almost like an installation on the floor. It is also very interesting because this particular arrangement has got nothing to do with any representational composition. That is this composition does not refer to any landscape, any real composition or any real space.

It simply refers to a visual mind, an aesthetically very calculative mind, which has created this composition with several units and the way the units have been divided and placed and reconfigured, clearly suggests that no identity, no identification, no recognition is necessary here. You can only enjoy the rhythm, the relationship, the harmony and what is that abstract rhythm, that abstract wave of connection flowing through all the units and connecting all these units together.

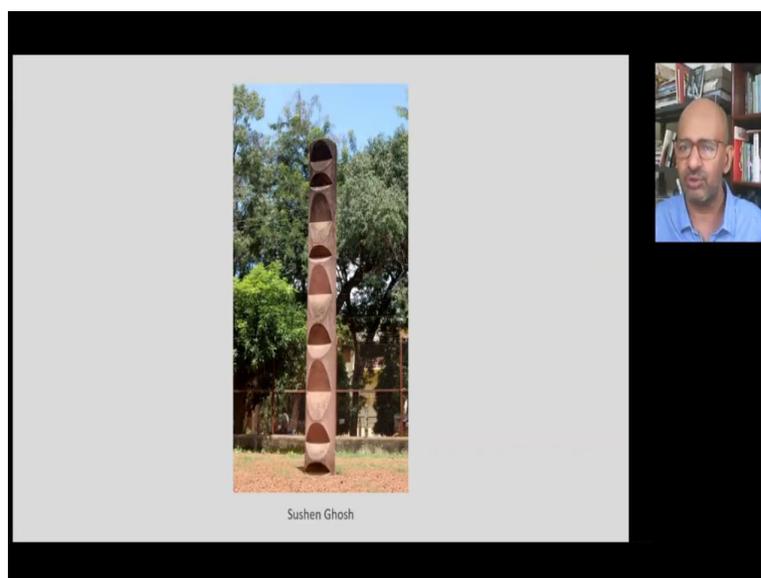
So, even our appreciation should also be developing. We should try to develop our appreciation based on not necessarily any concrete real life experience but on the abstract feeling and abstract reception of our life, nature and not that in our real life we are completely disconnected from abstraction, not that abstraction is actually or only a property of some paintings and sculptures. In fact this is what many abstract artists believe. They think, though we may not be paying attention to it, abstraction or abstract elements are often built into our daily experience, our real life experience. We may not be aware of that.

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So, in that sense these abstract sculptures although they do not refer to anything very objective in real life but they are deeply connected to our real life experiences, experiences which could be poetic, which could be lyrical, which could be musical, which could be very evocative and emotional but may not be possible to express very literally and that is why abstraction.

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So, here is the one artist who- whole life and he is still alive and working, dedicated himself to this challenge of abstraction and to be very honest abstraction is a challenge.

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IN the field of painting –  
Some of the artists of the 1940s like V. S. Gaitonde, S. H. Raza and Ram Kumar evolved as pure abstract painters.

Later, Prabhakar Barwe, Jeram Patel, Ganesh Haloi, Nasreen Mohamedi and Prabhakar Kolte deeply committed themselves to abstract art and earned great fame for their contribution to modern Indian art.



V. S. Gaitonde



V. S. Gaitonde



Now, let us look at some abstract paintings. Again in the field of painting some of the best and very well-known artists of the 1940's like V. S. Gaitonde, S. H. Raza, Ram Kumar later evolved as pure abstract painters and you all know that V. S. Gaitonde right from the beginning was an abstract painter.

Then, later Prabhakar Barwe, Jeram Patel, Ganesh Haloi, Nasreen Mohamedi, Prabhakar Kolte, they deeply committed themselves to abstract art and earned great fame for their contribution to modern Indian art and specifically the domain of abstract art.

So, here is one painting by V. S. Gaitonde, again where you may relate that blue circular form with moon or sun. You may relate the vertical forms on the left hand side with something that you recall or you maybe able to associate with. Suddenly when I look at this painting, the forms on the left hand side, they get associated, not very consciously but subconsciously to the boats maybe on the river.

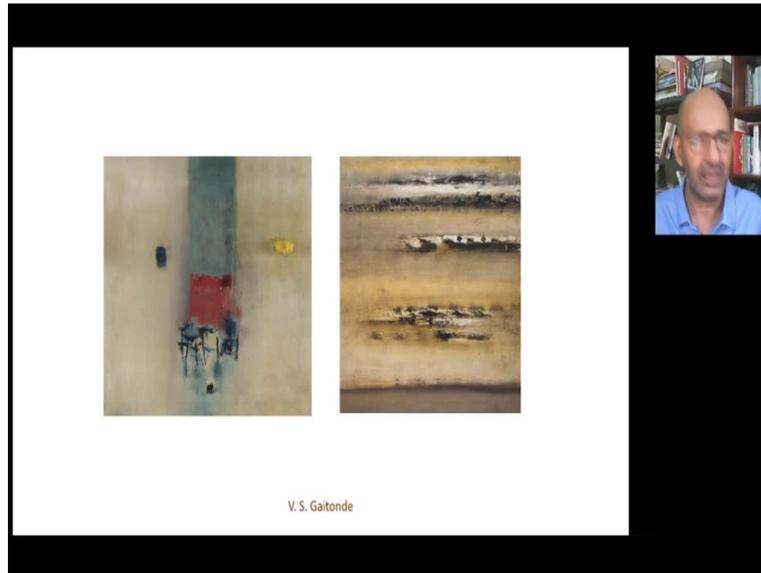
So, it is possible that some of the ideas in many abstract paintings actually come from very original experience, real life experience but later they become pure abstract expressions without any direct reference to real life experience or object or figures.

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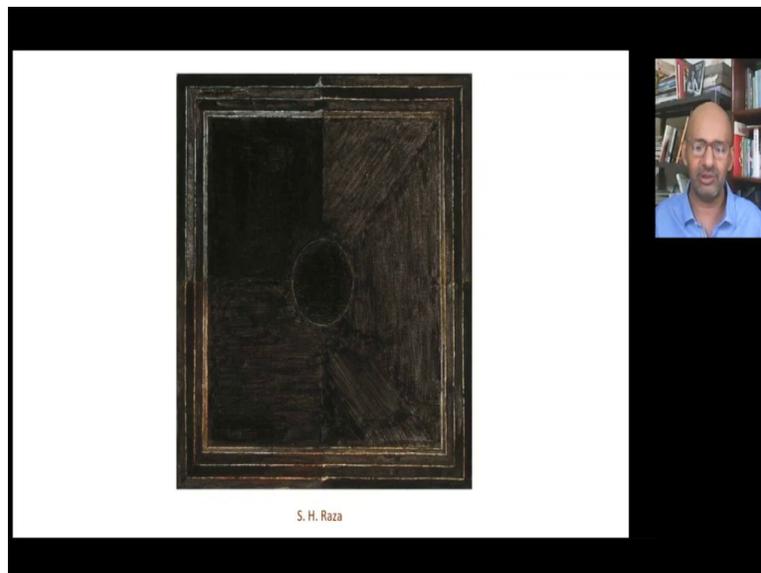
So V. S. Gaitonde and many other painters while they are dealing with the abstraction not just as a form but as a new language of art they are also at the same time dealing with material, medium and trying to explore the abstract possibilities of material and medium as much as possible, be it watercolor, oil color anything.

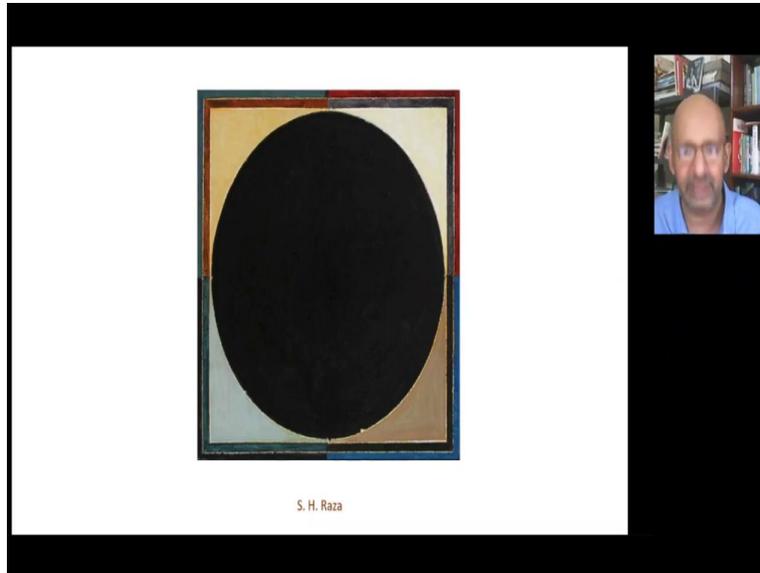
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And that is very very clear in Gaitonde's paintings and that is also evident in the paintings by many others.

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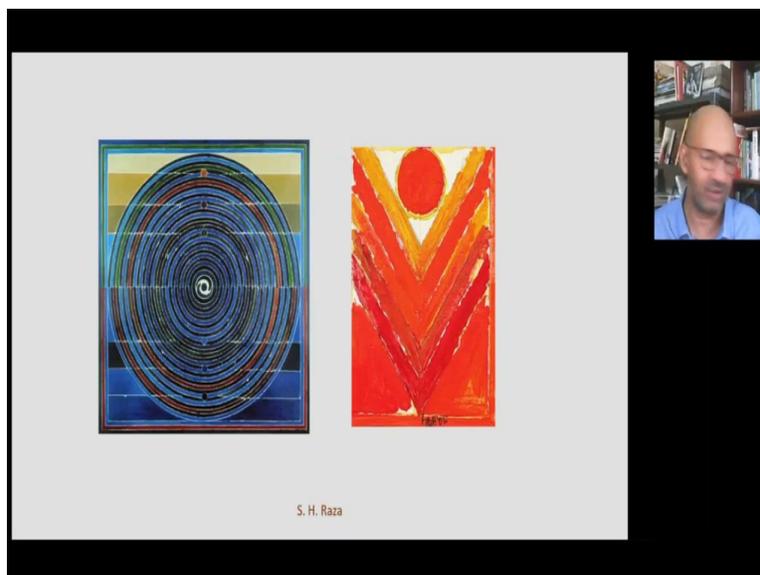




You all know that Raza, that famous painter from the Progressive Artist Group Bombay, eventually evolved into a very famous painter who worked on Bindu, very famous for his Bindu paintings throughout his life. But Bindu may have a very symbolic meaning with our Indian culture and that is how Raza conceived Bindu- something to associate with his Indian culture.

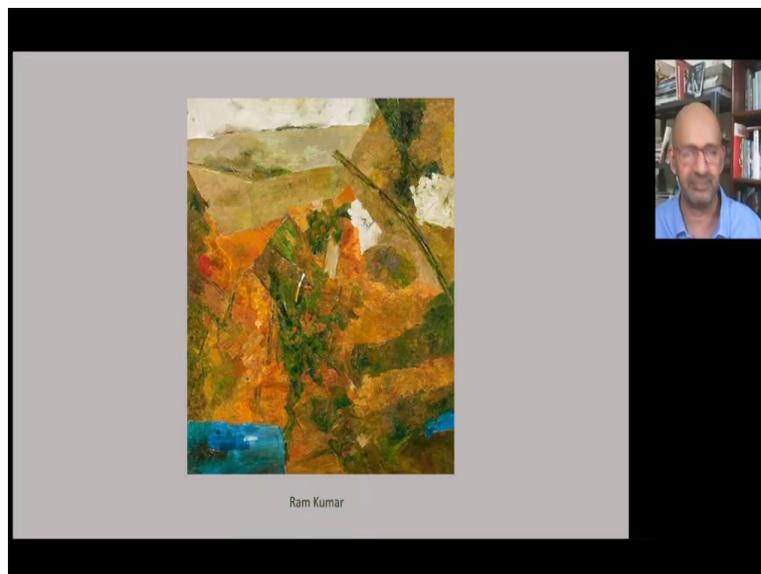
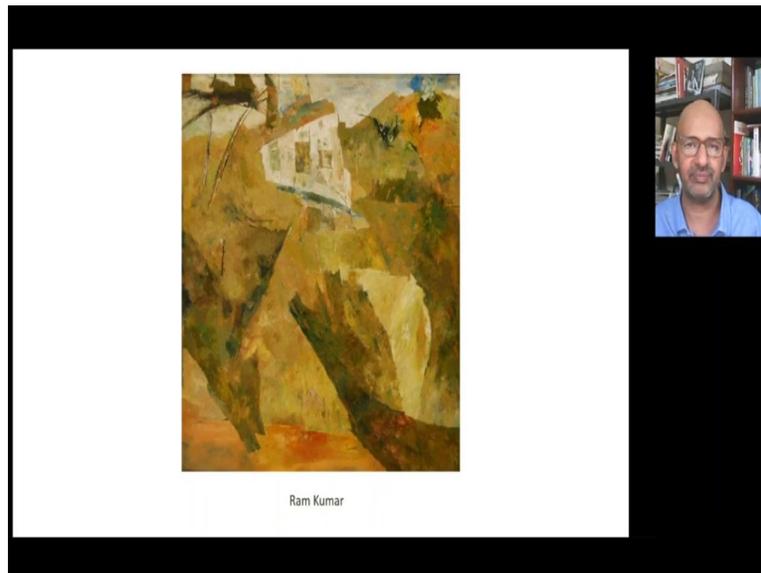
Nevertheless the language of the paintings he painted is purely abstract because Raza's paintings do not represent anything real or anything objective.

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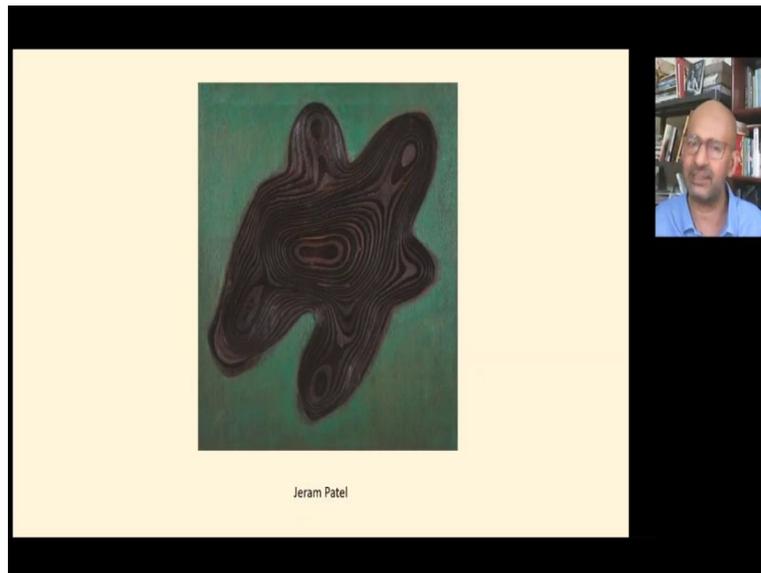
As you can see in his innumerable paintings. So, what Raza and many other abstract painters are dealing with? Essentially is a concept. A concept which they refuse to explain in very literal and figurative terms.

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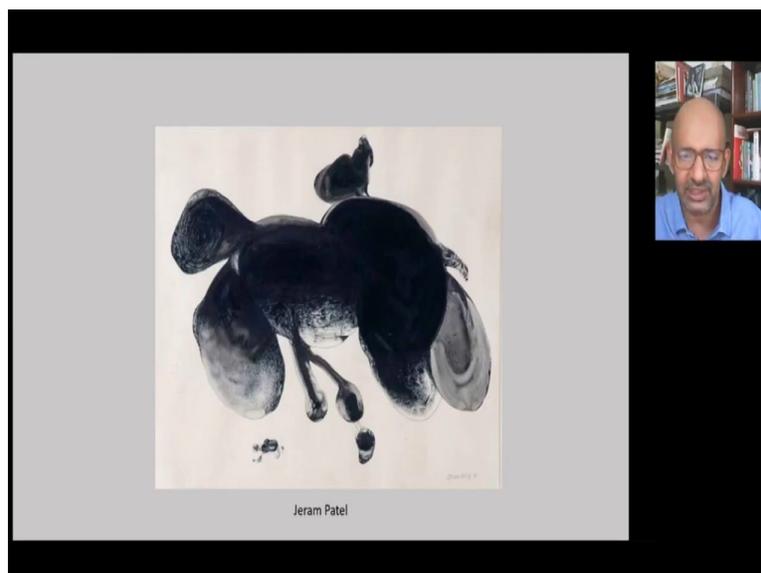
Same with Ram Kumar. Though in some of his paintings, some visual associations with some architecture, land, landscape, even trees are sometimes visible but the basic construction of his paintings is based on abstraction, nothing else but abstraction.

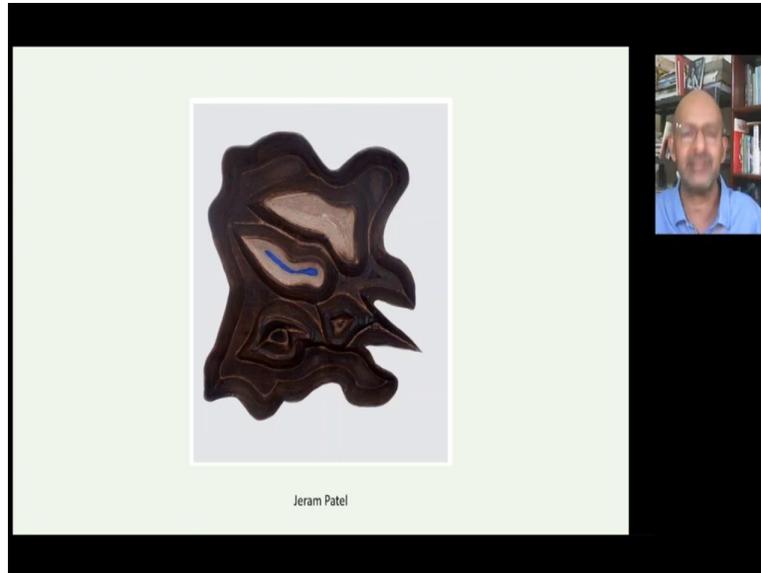
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Jeram Patel is again one artist who is out and out an abstract artist who develops his language of abstraction on the basis of pattern, on the basis of some organic feelings and patterns that he might have noticed in various organisms or in various elements in his life.

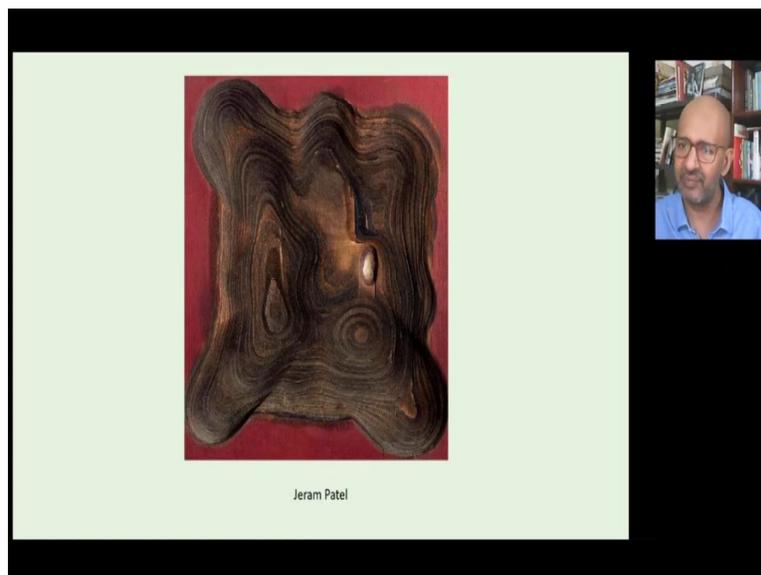
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And then he has always tried to develop that into essentially pure forms though sometimes his form may refer to some real life object or figures or birds. But what is finally important is not that reference but the form. So, that is the reason why we want to see Jeram Patel as one of the artists belonging to the category of abstraction.

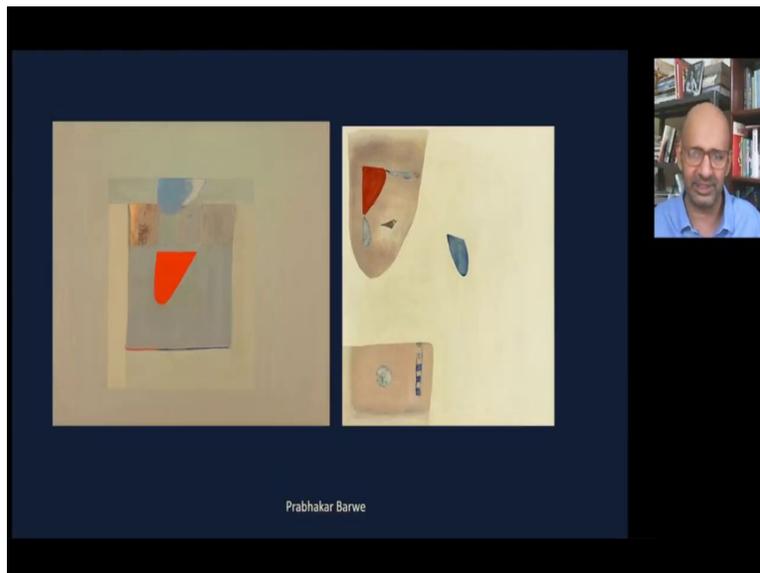
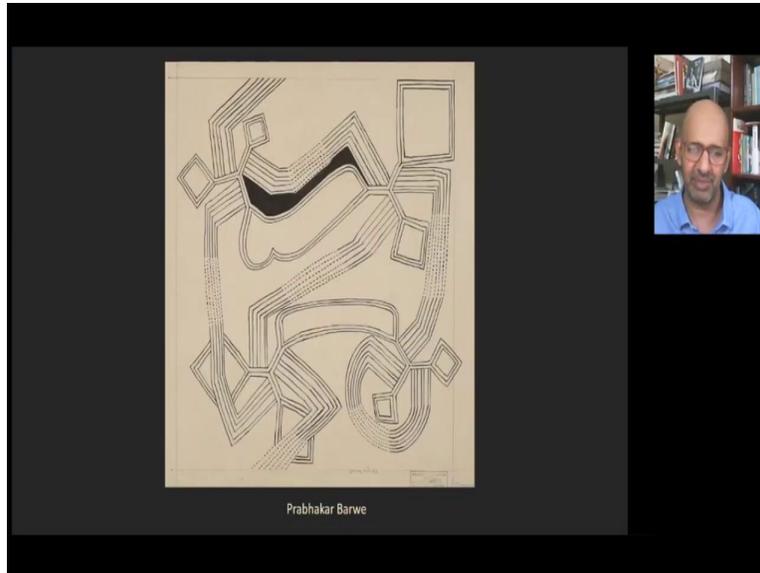
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So, you can see how not only the form- even the technique of working, the painting, the pattern, the texture, all these things are being explored and exploited by many abstract artists.

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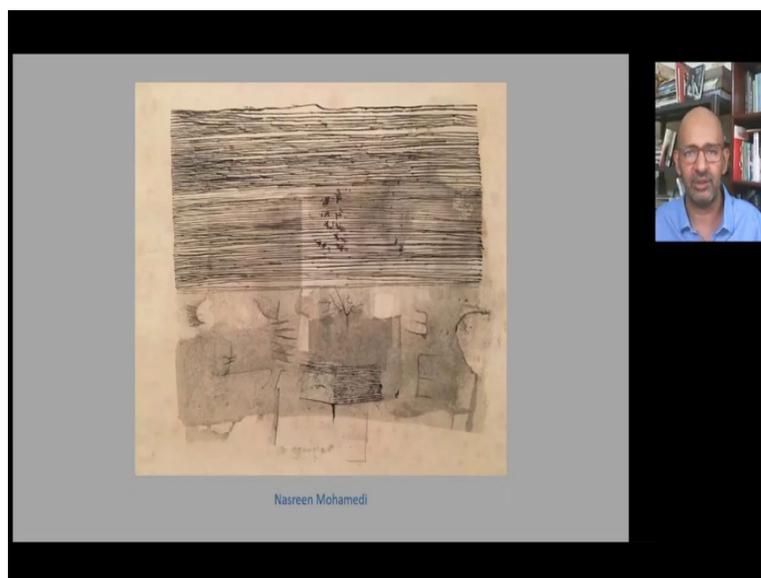
Prabhakar Barwe again in his paintings sometimes you do find like you see a pen with the cap and some geometric tools etc and envelope maybe right in the center but more and more as you keep looking at his paintings you see there is a very strong presence of abstraction where the references to real object almost become less important and abstraction become more and more important as you see in these drawings by Prabhakar Barwe as well. And then of course in these works Barwe explores the pure abstract language.

Now, while you keep looking at the abstract works by different painters and artists, also do pay attention to the tremendous variations and varieties we come across. Had abstraction been either a very easy task or a shortcut or a kind of work that one does when one does not have any idea.

I mean these are the popular notions people often pamper and I urge you to get rid of these popular notions completely and look at abstract art seriously and to begin with this attention, to this process of looking at abstract art seriously. At least right at the beginning, look at the variations of abstract art that we encounter in the history of modern art.

In the classes, in these lectures we are only able to see a few because of the constraint of time. But these artists are not the only artists who have done abstract paintings or who are doing abstract paintings. There are plenty more, many more than them. Which also proves that abstract art is not something very incidental or trivial or less significant but rather it has been taken up very seriously by some of the most serious and sincere artists of modern Indian art like them.

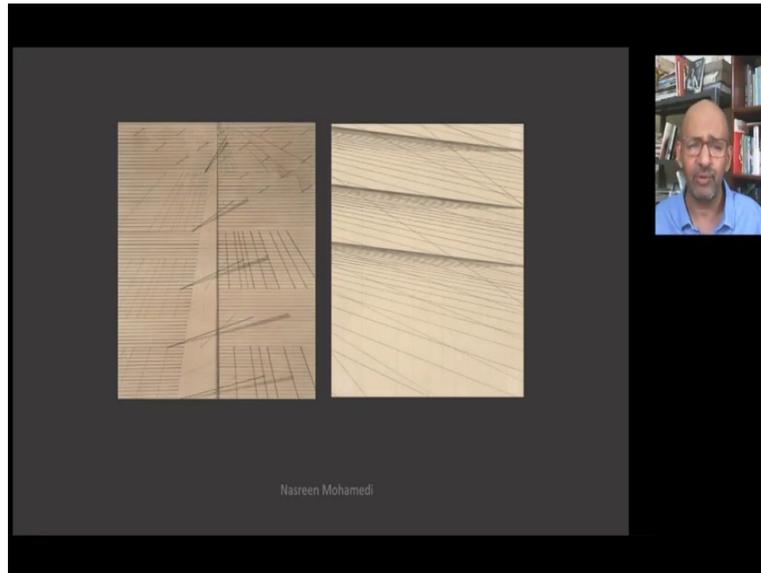
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And now we are looking at Nasreen Mohamedi, a very important artist who taught at Baroda for some time and a very good friend of the Baroda artists like Gulam Sheikh and Nilima Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar and also the Bombay artist like Sudhir Patwardhan and Gieve Patel.

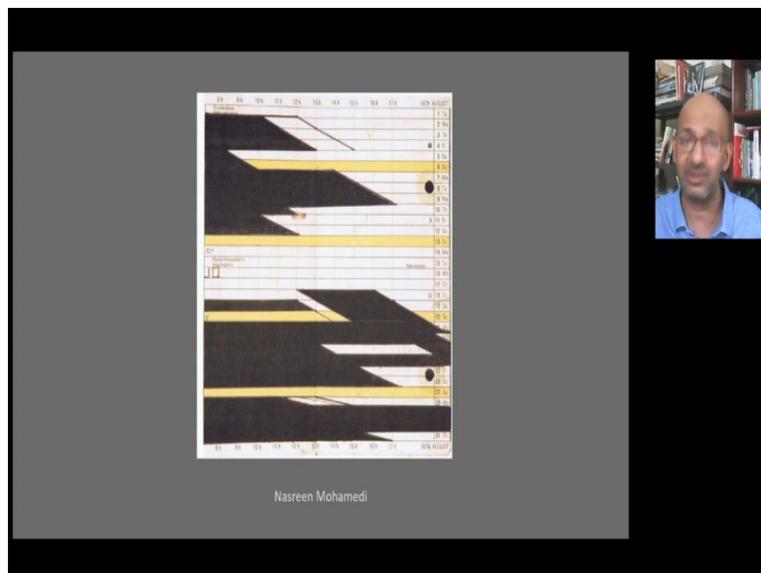
Now, despite she being a very close friend of those artists who were primarily figurative painters, Nasreen Mohamedi chose to follow a different path altogether which is pure abstract as you can see in this work by her.

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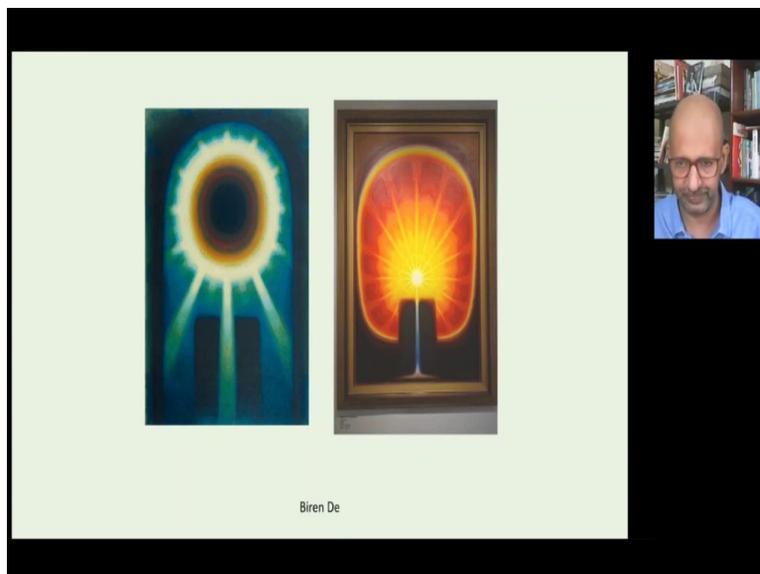
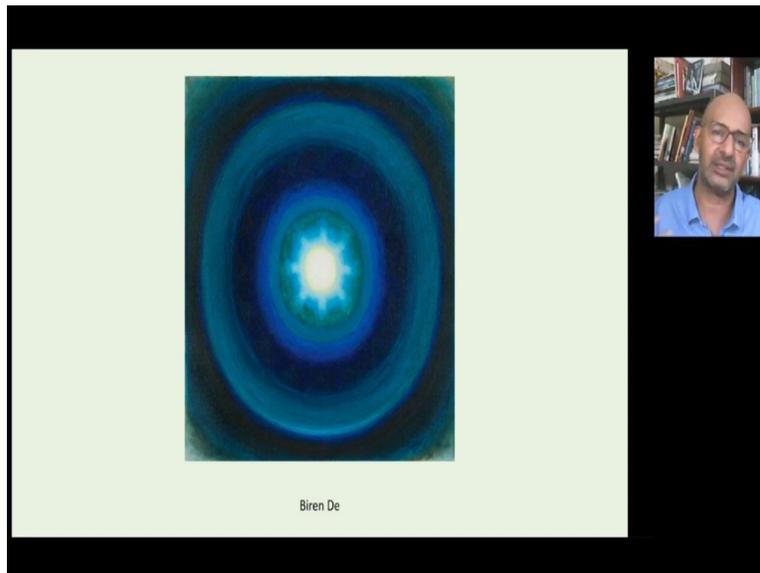
Or these works where Nasreen is using pure geometric lines, angular lines, vertical lines, horizontal lines to create a sense of infinite space. Now, this spatial infinity is something that her works actually evoke but that is not the only quality. There are many subtle sense of rhythm, harmony and even I would say stillness, quietness which actually pervade her works which you can feel and see- more you look at her works.

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So, Nasreen Mohamedi also happens to be a very very important abstract painter when her friends and associates and artists around her were mostly doing figurative painting or figurative sculpture.

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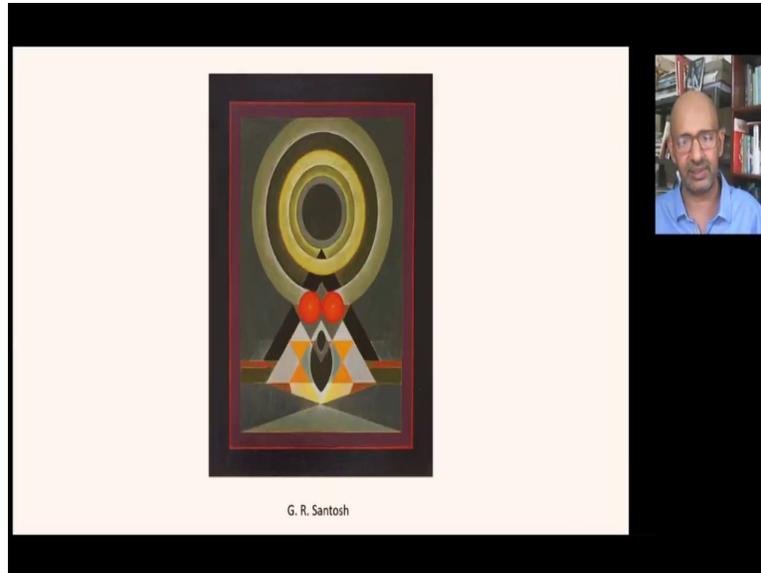


G. R. Santosh



G. R. Santosh





We must also remember one artist who lived in Delhi and worked there Biren De. Though two artists that we are going to look at now that are Biren De here and G. R. Santosh, though these artists Biren De, look at his paintings once again. Remember the forms.

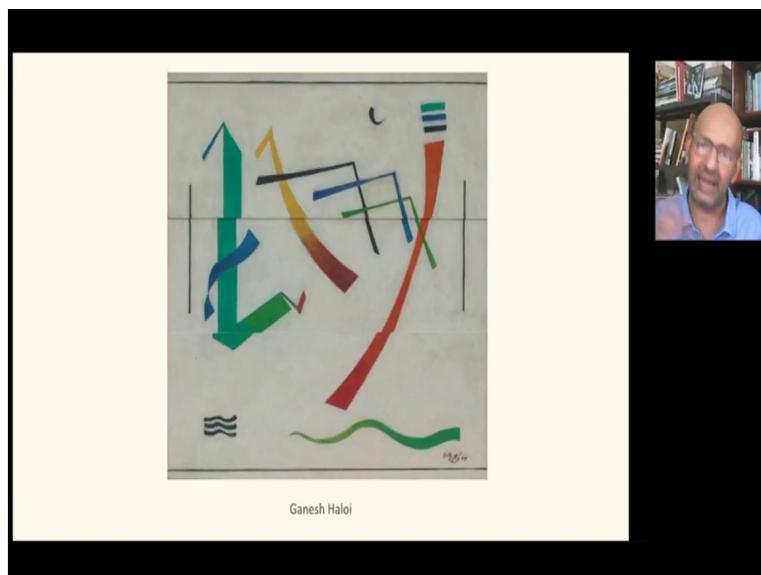
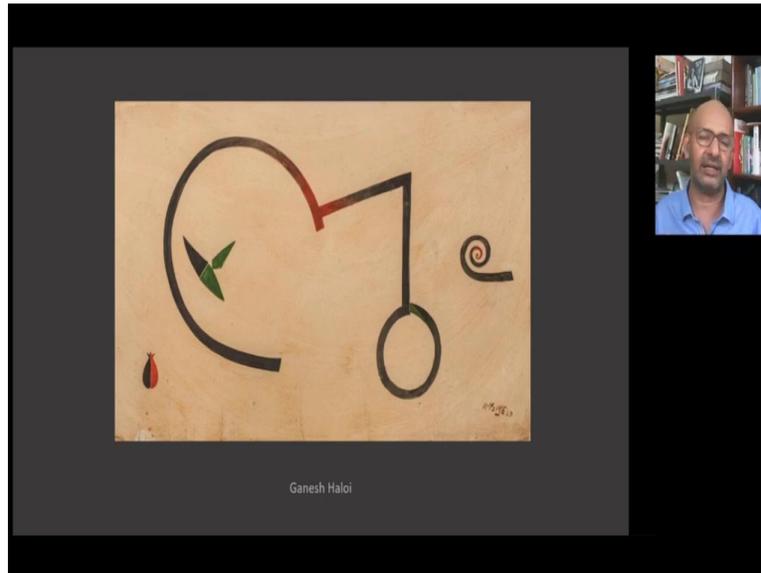
Remember the light, a sense of light and illumination inside the forms. Then look at G. R. Santosh. Look at the forms very very carefully and I am sure all of us have been able to identify something with this kind of abstraction both Biren De and G. R. Santosh.

That is something symbolic, something religious metaphor. Something that we will call religious ideas are there in these paintings as the basic and fundamental source. So, in that sense the abstract paintings by G. R. Santosh and Biren De are not or do not belong to the category to which Gaitonde's paintings belong.

Gaitonde's paintings are more pictorial, more and more devoid of any reference. G. R. Santosh and Biren De's paintings do have a reference but their references are not to any real life or real object but they are to a symbolic life, the symbolic ideas which are already there in our tradition, in tantric tradition, in different sects of Hindu tradition, so on and so forth.

So, their sources may have something to do with religious and spiritual tradition of India but the ultimate visual result that we see in their paintings painted by G. R. Santosh and Biren De have a very strong presence of abstraction and that is why their paintings can also be looked at while we are looking at the history of abstract art in modern India. One more G. R. Santosh.

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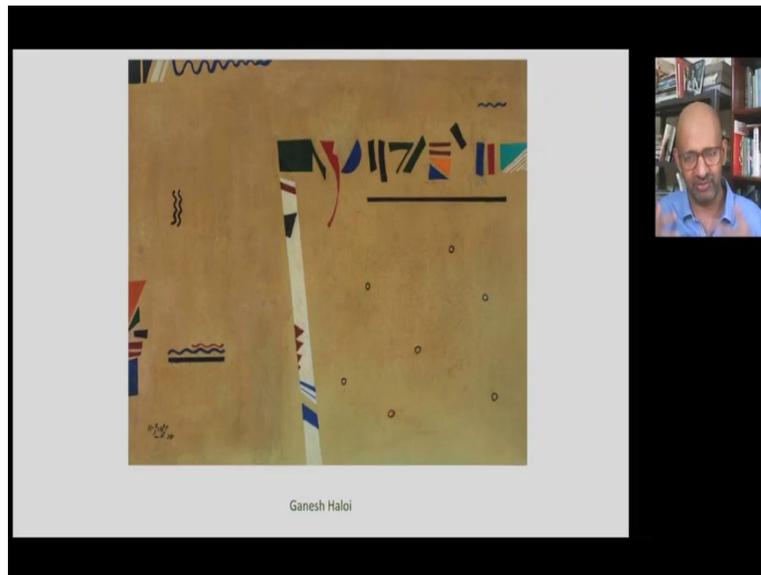
Now, here we are looking at the paintings by one very important abstract painter based in Kolkata- Ganesh Haloi. For over more than 40-50 years he is like devoted to the language of abstraction and again like many other abstract painters Ganesh Haloi's language of abstraction also derives from real life experiences.

For example, as he himself has said in many interviews and also written in many of his autobiographical writings that he loved to roam around in nature, in villages, in marshy lands and

he used to enjoy the smell of nature, the loneliness, the stillness and all the organic feelings of nature.

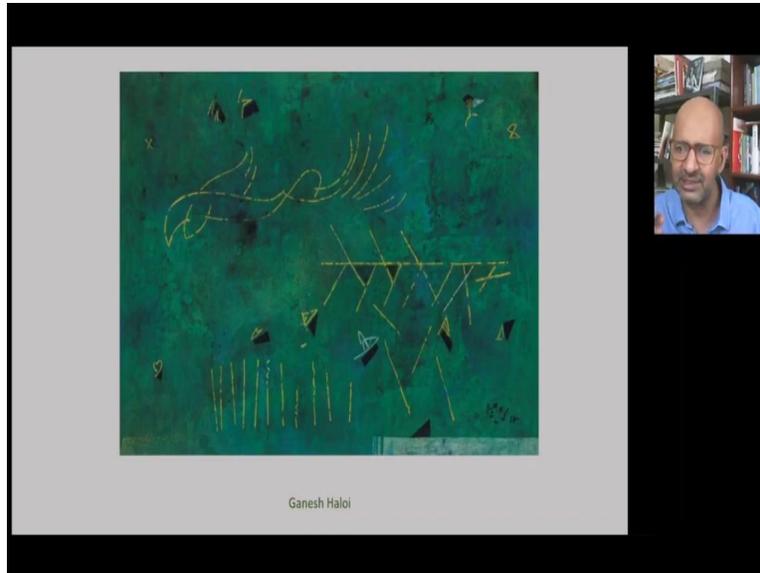
Now, when he grew up, he always tried to recall those feelings and evoked the same feelings through his paintings but without painting real trees, a real pond, a real night or day or a real marshland, he tries to express the same feelings through the language of abstraction.

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And this is the significance of an artist like Ganesh Haloi who decides to use the language of abstraction as his mode of expression and what he is expressing is not necessarily abstract but certainly not necessarily very materialistic also.

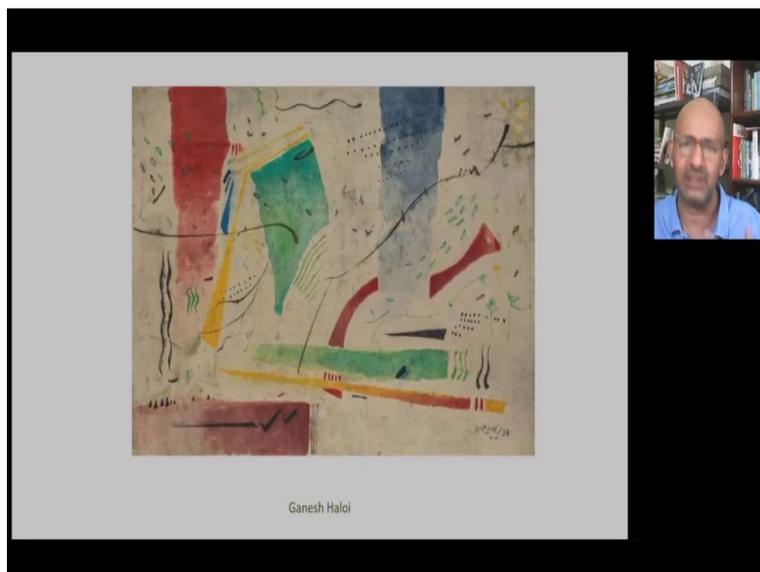
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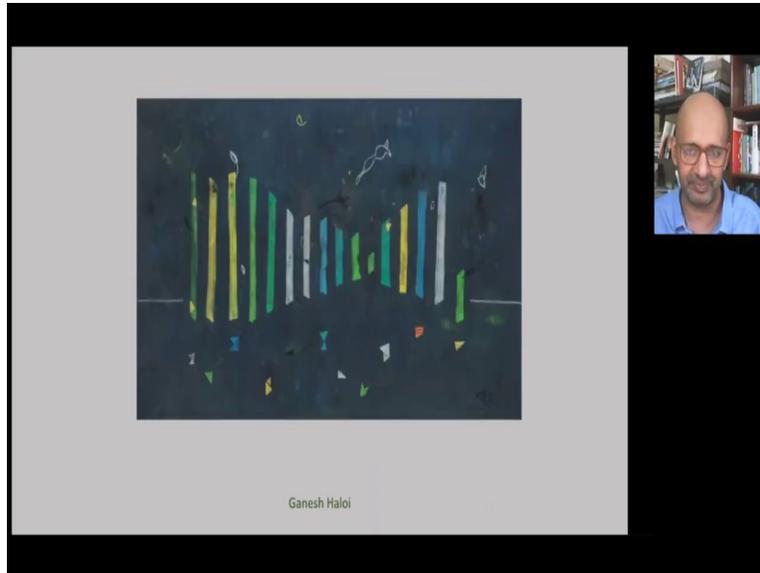


And that is why his abstraction, which is highly dependent on very calculated placement of lines, shapes, patterns, colors on a ground that is prepared with layers of pigments and colors and what finally Ganesh Haloi is able to create is a very organic space.

So, on one hand it is organic, which means it is very earthly. On the other hand, it is very abstract which means it is not having any reference to any real life. So, Ganesh Haloi plays between these two phenomenons, something that is seen, something that is unseen. Something that has been experienced and something that has been felt.

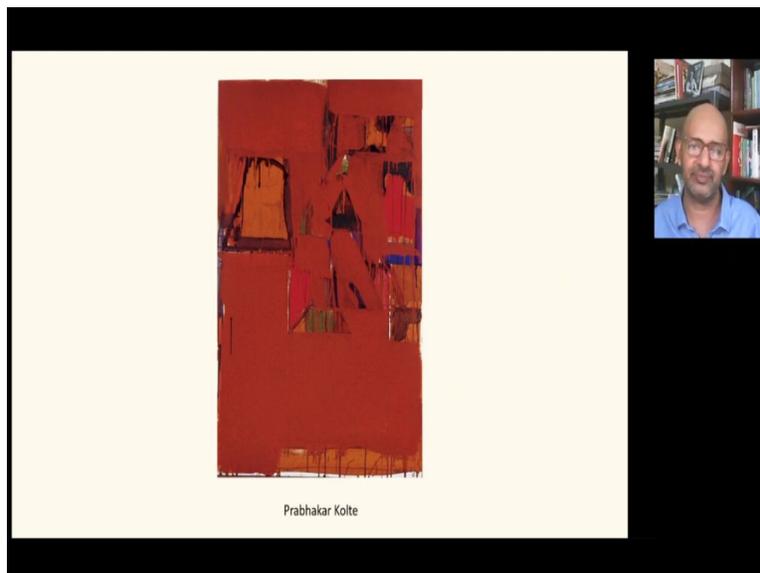
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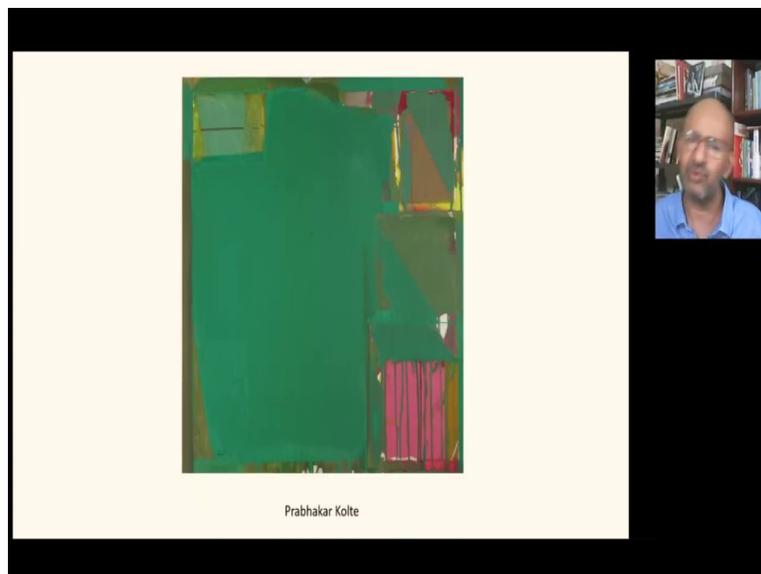
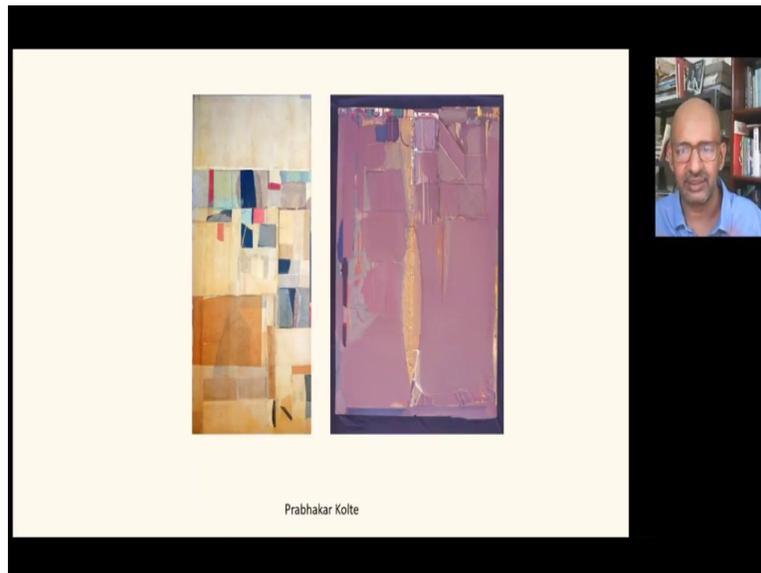
So, hundreds of paintings by Ganesh Haloi which are not at all a repetition of each other and this is what is again we should pay attention to- that contrary to the idea that many abstract painters repeat themselves most of the abstract painters and artists and sculptors are actually the ones who do not repeat themselves. They look for variations. Ganesh Haloi is one such artist whose works are full of variety, one more.

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And Prabhakar Kolte the junior most among the artists we are looking at now, today. Right at the outset Kolte again started exploring the possibilities of abstraction not just as a form but as a language.

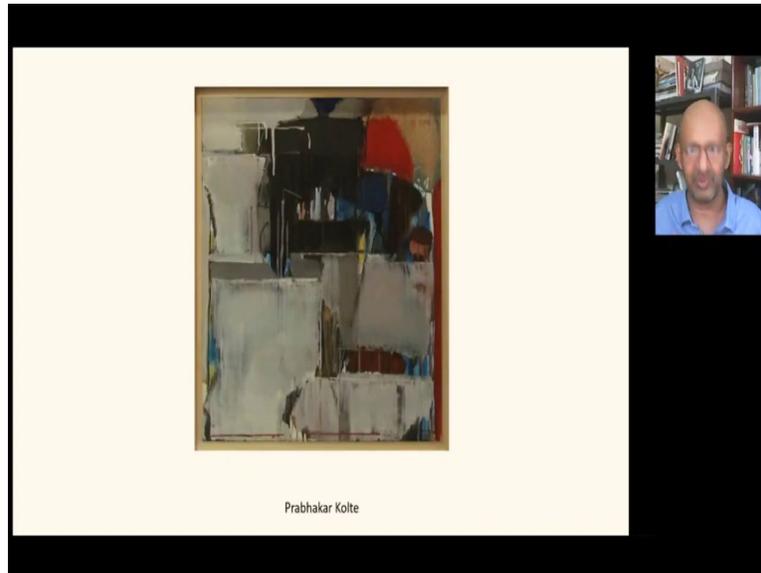
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Abstraction for Kolte is also a means to communicate. Though his works like any other abstract painter's, would not contain or imply any real life references as such, but through deeply engaging colors, patterns, often as you can see in this painting on the right hand below dripping paints, not only Kolte creates a space where one can engage visually and aesthetically but in

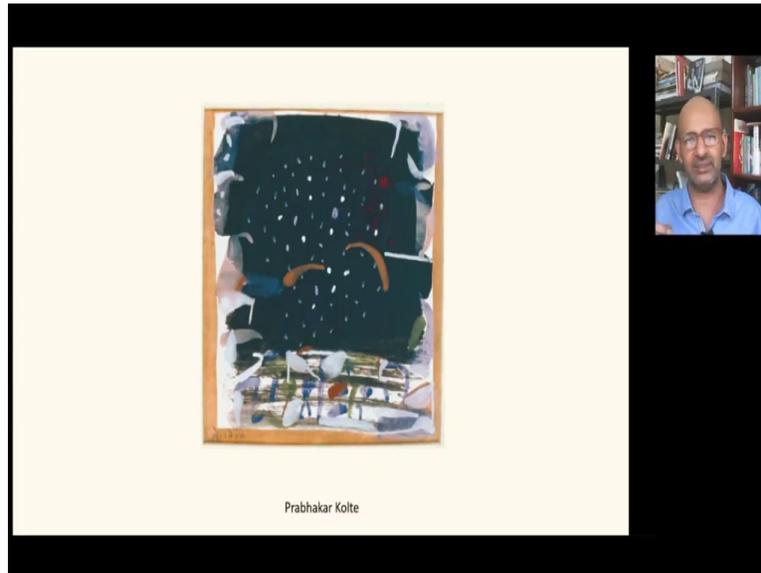
certain paintings he also keeps the process of his paintings little open and that is why his works often look like as if the artist or the painter is still at work.

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So, Prabhakar Kolte's work often gives us that feeling that he is still at work.

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In fact one of the significant features of many abstract art and particularly paintings is that when you keep looking at these paintings unless and until the paintings are extremely finished in terms of their concept and also application like the works by G. R. Santosh or Biren De.

But these works by Kolte, Gaitonde, even Ganesh Haloi evoke the feeling that we are not only looking at the finished work but we are also looking at the process of painting. This is one very important moment of appreciating abstract art. Thank you.