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### Between inner and outward vision: Developing teaching methods to adapt established Bhutanese painting techniques to new technologies and audiences

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#### Abstract

This article adopts the format of a research paper and photo essay, documenting a painting workshop in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, carried out by an art and design lecturer of mixed Indian, South East Asian and European heritage. It describes the visual methodologies that informed the design of a colour study workshop, the outcomes of which were showcased at the exhibition *Taming Colour* in Bhutan (23 September, 2017). The images used in this article include photographs taken and shared on social media platforms by participants and attendees. Born out of complexities arising in Bhutan over the past decade that are related to artefact production, including the availability of acrylic paint and smartphones, the article considers perspective of a 'knowledge gap' in traditional Bhutanese painting to create transcultural, technical encounters with a focus on colour harmonisation and 3D rendering skills.

#### Keywords

Bhutan; Choki Traditional Art School; VAST Bhutan; Bhutanese contemporary art; cross-cultural education; visual research methods; photo essay; thangka

#### Note

All photos are by the author unless otherwise credited.

#### Bhutanese traditional painting

Located east of the Himalayan mountain range and much like regional neighbour Tibet, Bhutan is one of the last remaining nations that uphold sacred Buddhist teaching and practices. This extends to arts and crafts, including an artistic practice upheld in Buddhist teaching, the painting method 'thangka'.



Figure 1: Front cover of Choki Traditional Art School newsletter (Choki School, 2017).

Thangka (as shown in Figure 1) is a traditional painting art form within the teachings of Buddhism that has three main types: didactic, narrative and meditative (Karma and Wangdi, 2016, p.39). Traditional Bhutanese paintings may feature a deity or a landscape scene that illustrates religious history or instruction. It is an art form practiced predominantly within the Himalayan region and includes countries such as Tibet, though this article focuses on Bhutanese thangka.

Similar to other traditional painting practices such as Ch'an or Zen Buddhism, in thangka, a sense of form, rhythmic feeling and relaxed attentiveness are used. This mental and physical process achieves 'inward automatism', whereby brushwork flows effortlessly in a disciplined manner. Buddhist monks, for example, worked with the brush as an aid to meditative internalization (Itten, 1970, p.49).



Figure 2: Thangka sold at the Choki School shop.

For centuries, to facilitate meditation, thangka are comparatively predetermined by using templates. The same template, for example featuring Guru Drago (Figure 2) may be replicated by hundreds of traditional painters. Traditional Bhutanese art had ‘strong didactic intentions [...] to convey the profound teachings of Buddha’ foremost, other issues such as ‘artistic creativity, stylistic distinctions and the identity of the artists [were] not important in traditional Bhutanese painting’ (Karma and Wangdi, 2016, p.12).

In the past, thangka was almost solely practiced by Buddhist monks, but a transition occurred in Bhutan between approximately 1960 and 1980, when monks no longer painted solely for meditation. Devout followers and citizens are ‘commissioned by monks or common laity’ (Karma and Wangdi, 2016, p.38) to cultivate painting skills and create thangka for the karmic rewards prescribed in Buddhist teaching. Additionally, traditional painting skills extended a means of earning income for families, by selling the artefact, or decorating architectural exteriors or interiors (Altmann, 2016).



Figure 3a, and 3b: Decorative exteriors, Royal Textile Academy building, Thimphu.

*Since this transition in painting practice from monk to citizen, the role and audience of traditional painting has changed. Local and international audience perception has become a consideration due to the potential capacity for people to earn a living. When I first visited Bhutan, I arrived approximately 50 years after this transition, witnessing how modernity has changed traditional artistic practices in Bhutan. This transition is the historical event that lies at the root of the following article.*

### **My teaching background and Bhutan**



Figure 4: I (pictured right) encountered the Choki Traditional Art School, an arts and crafts institution in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, during employment at the Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology in India in March 2014 (where I also co-facilitated an international exchange involving Zurich University of the Arts).



Figures 5a and 5b: Choki School is a private institution for youths from rural and underprivileged areas that have no previous formal art education.



Figures 6a and 6b: The paintings pictured are made in a non-traditional, once-a-year three-week 'Creativity' class within the Choki School painting programme, and then sold in the onsite shop.

Students found it a challenge to create non-traditional art forms and Choki School invited me to run another workshop with students as a way of introducing elements of outsider 'taste' that would expand the audience and enhance appeal of the non-traditional artworks they produced, sold through their shop onsite and online to boost funding.

The subsequent workshop I designed developed insights from my experiences teaching at the Srishti Institute which, combined with my mixed Indian, South East Asian and European heritage, resulted in an adaptation of teaching skills in cross-cultural learning. It was pedagogically useful to bypass linguistically focused engagement when, for example, the spoken language used by Bhutanese participants relating to workshop learning outcomes seemed to prioritise other non-traditional forms of art over the Bhutanese style. This was problematic as adapting traditional and non-traditional forms to create outcomes was a priority during the workshop and I had to sensitively apply 'an aesthetic of openness towards otherness' (Wilson, 1998, p.351) in order to design a disciplinary-inclusive workshop.

I was able to grapple underlying complexities facing Choki School related to financial pressures and maintaining a traditional outlook though I faced several difficulties when designing this workshop due to differing institutional evaluative criteria.

For example, in UK higher education arts curricula explorative material processes should be documented, but in traditional Himalayan art and craft schools material processes are less significant than cultural artefacts in predetermined formats such as thangka. The workshop aimed to discover cross-cultural learning and teaching strategies and engage Bhutanese painters in emerging alternative ideas, whilst also creating resources for peers that can be used in classes populated by people from unknown and mixed cultural backgrounds.

The key point was to help traditional painters consider outsider tastes. Through appealing to outsider taste, work created could reach an even wider audience by greater circulation, a poignant situation for artists and others in Bhutan, which has been relatively closed to the rest of the world for centuries. Since limited tourism was introduced in Bhutan in 1974, the government levies a costly tourist visa, charging US\$250 a day to most foreign visitors.

Although traditional visual mediation techniques such as thangka are still practised, it became increasingly important during the research to adapt workshop participants' established skills to a range of possibilities, using digital and online technologies to reach wider audiences.

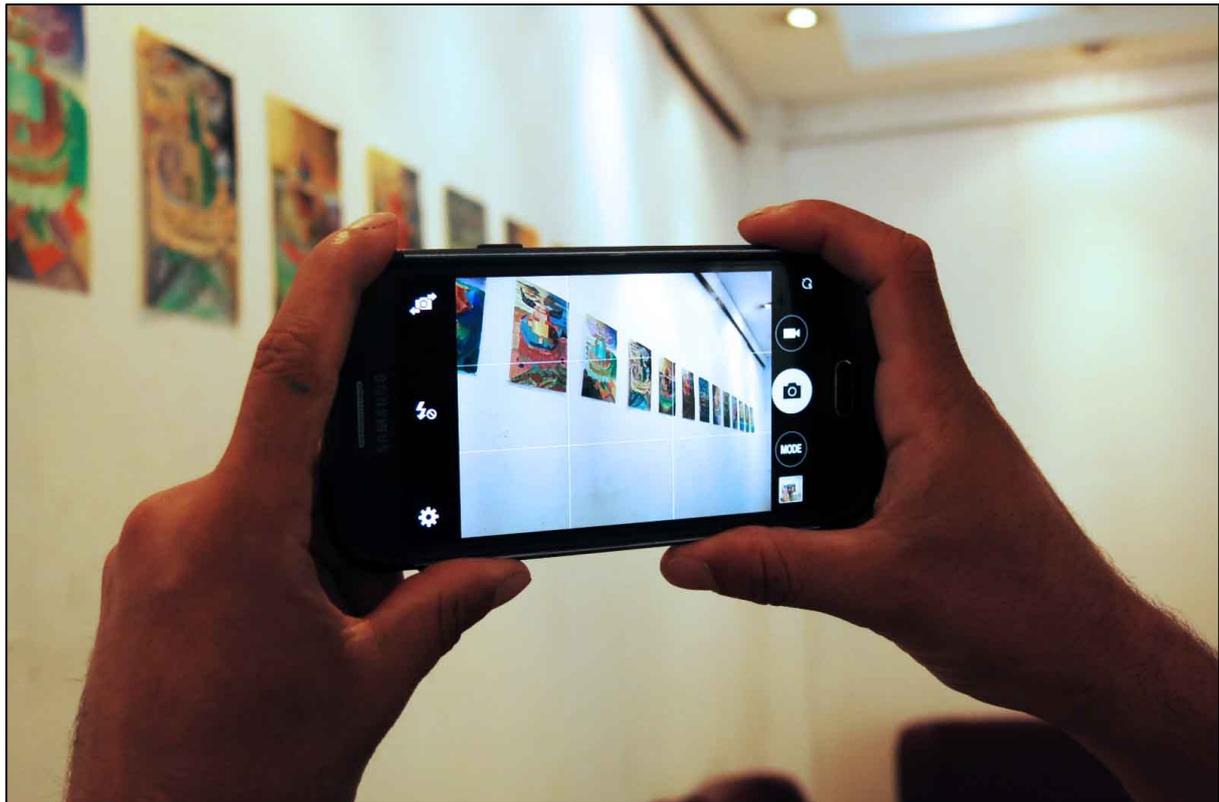


Figure 7: During the workshop and exhibition, most participants owned and used smart phones to take photos and access social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. New visual mediation technologies, such as those found online, could also help promote greater circulation and reach an outside audience.

### **From local traditional to internationalised markets**

In order to design learning outcomes that helped participants to enhance the appeal of artworks created and circulated with a digital emphasis, the research uncovered another significant change that has affected thangka practice, the introduction of acrylic paint.

Previously, natural pigment and mineral colours predominated. Published historical reference indicating when acrylic paint was first introduced in Bhutan is scarce, however, conversations with thangka masters indicates that they started using it in their works in the late 1990s to early 2000s, almost five decades after its invention in the United States in the late 1940s. Previously in Bhutanese thangka, natural minerals were laboriously sourced, extracted and applied. At Choki School acrylic paints are easily sourced and applied, however, the process of harmonising colour is complex and challenging. Although the School has a strictly traditional focus, the painting programme is focused on speed and production and there is now less time to develop painting skills for karmic rewards, as devout followers and monks used to do in the past.



Figure 8: Within the six-year programme only one week is allocated to colour studies. Colour studies are not deemed important as pre-mixed acrylic paint (imported from India) in light and dark shades of the commonly used traditional colours – red, orange, blue and green – is readily available. Mixed and applied to canvases these pre-mixed colours speed up the process of applying paint.



Figure 9a and 9b: Painting each pictorial element at a different time has created confusion of depth of field within pictorial space, whereby disharmonies occur as various elements within pictorial depth of field are incorrectly rendered.

This impacts sale as it does not give the appearance of what thangka, painted in the past with mineral colours, looks like. This is pertinent as the school seeks to boost funding by the sale of artefacts with an authentic appearance.

The Swiss painter Johannes Itten, who taught at the Bauhaus, developed exercises for creating three-dimensionality in images. He argued that most of us are born with the ability to separate colours, but that painters must take it further and use each colour to its correct tonal value. For example, a lighter foreground, medium toned mid-ground and dark background, are pivotal to creating spatial depth. Itten's exercises delve deeper into tonal differentiation, into what he terms 'organization of planes' (Itten, 1970, p.42).



Figure 10a and 10b: A painting has to have two, three or four chief planes or groupings, which must be attuned to each other. If the organisation of planes is not grouped or constructed with appropriate light-dark contrast, proportion is not achieved. 'Each hue acquires an effect of reality, concreteness' (Itten, 1970, p.33) which can be seen, for example, when rendered in black and white.

Tonal light-dark proportions affect overall harmony within pictorial compositions and influence how an audience perceives spatial depth. Attaining 'an effect of physical reality', 'concreteness' and audience perception is now an important consideration in Bhutan. Identifying these problems of poor colour harmonisation skills led to the inclusion of Itten's techniques in the workshop.

My art practice helped me gain further first-hand experience of thangka practice. By creating works using some pictorial elements of a Bhutanese thangka. I reflected on aspects of the traditional Bhutanese painting curriculum and made 'researching your own practice a key element of educational enquiry in creative practice' by 'merging theory and practice [...] to implement action' (Orr and McDougall, 2014, p.175).



Figures 11a, 11b, 11c, 11d, 11e and 11f: Cutting-out cardboard or thick paper created stencils, and these were spray-painted to create completed images. Works also included etching on metallic card, hand-made paper, florescent leather, cartridge paper, velour, silk satin and appliqué techniques.



Figures 12a, 12b, 12c, 12d: At Choki School, template technology is used to replicate traditional images though differently to the work I produced, a template is created by poking through paper and applying fine white chalk dust to mark outlines that are to be painted.

I took the works I created, with these material similarities and dissimilarities to the traditional painting curriculum, to Bhutan. They helped build a common context by illustrating and making recognisable ideas I wished to develop through dialogue with thangka masters, workshop commissioners and participants. These experimental and awareness of the available resources further clarified research aims.

In Bhutan, the Choki School principal introduced me to Voluntary Artist's Studio Thimphu (VAST Bhutan) the country's most prominent non-exclusively traditional art organisation.



Figure 13a, 13b and 13c: VAST Bhutan building façade, surrounding grounds and inner studio.

They organised my entry visa and provided a workshop space in the country's capital city, Thimphu. VAST Bhutan members comprise of local Bhutanese artists who've had local traditional and/or non-traditional art education in surrounding countries. Some have had no formal training whatsoever and are self-taught.

'Technique' was the focus of the workshop, which aimed to explore elements that are less established in Bhutanese painting. A brief was clarified, to help participants create work that appears 'less flat' and 'more 3D' through learning about colour harmonisation.



Figure 14a, 14b and 14c: VAST Bhutan members and Choki School students came together to attend the two-week workshop with ten attendees aged 18 to 32 from each organisation. The workshop ran for two weeks from 11-22 September 2017, from Monday-Friday, between 9am-4pm. During the workshop, participants were expected to complete four learning activities.

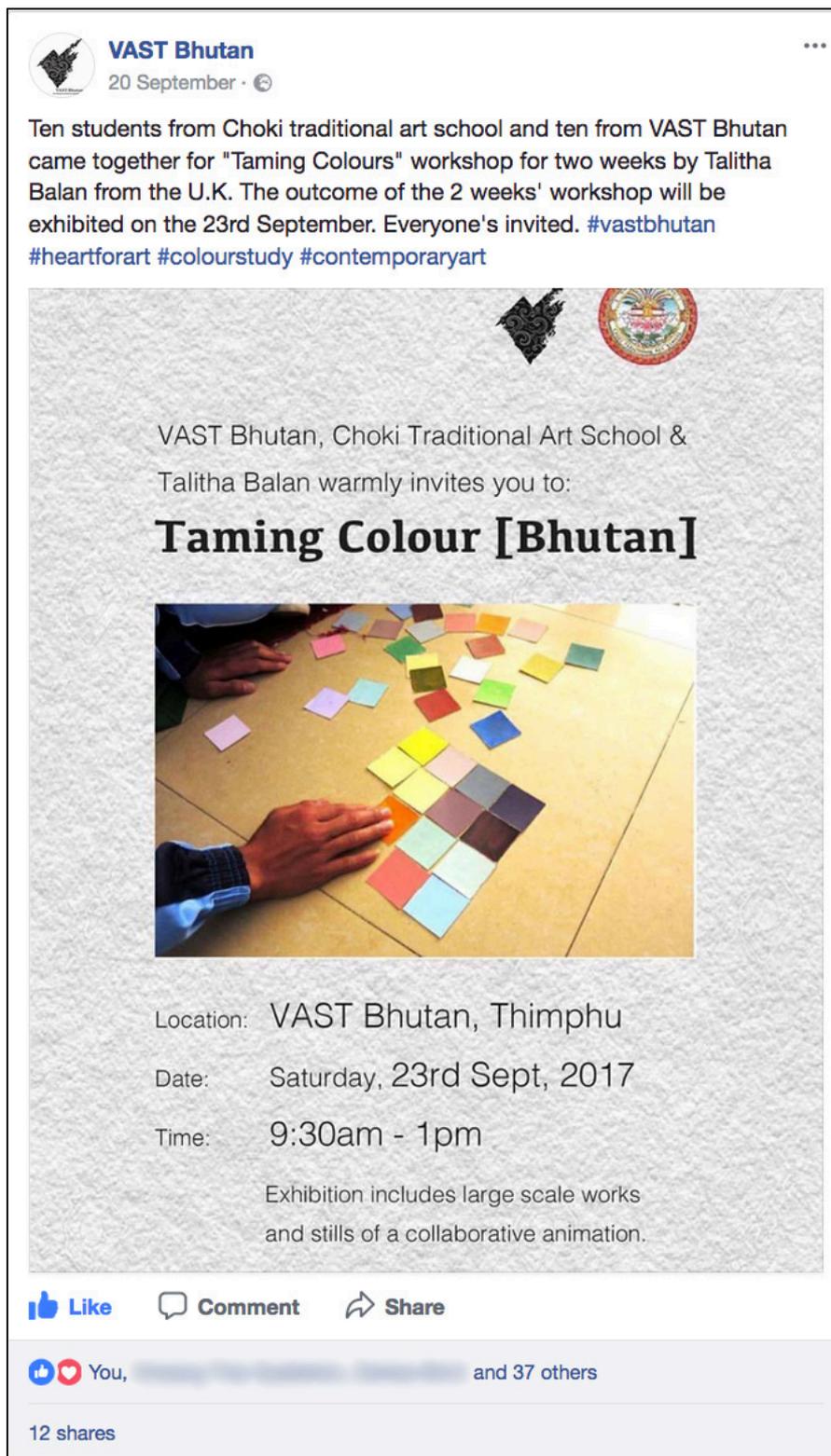


Figure 15: Instagram digital flyer advertising the *Taming Colour [Bhutan]* exhibition held at the workshop space, a day after workshop completion showcased workshop outcomes. VAST Bhutan (2017).

### Visual research methods

As this article discusses how spoken language can be supplemented or enhanced by visual techniques in order to be disciplinary and culturally inclusive (McDonald, 2004) so too did the research adopt a more visual form.

#### *'Shooting script' methodology*

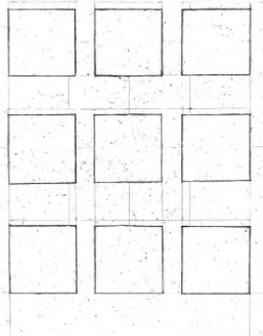
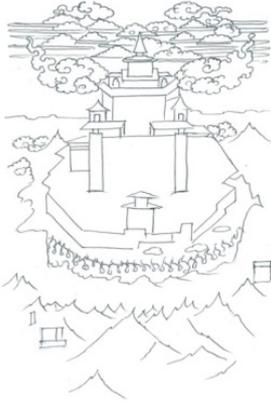


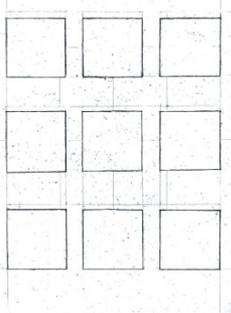
Figure 16: To record the project, the 'shooting script' (Suchar, 1997) method was used. This involves taking photographs that directly respond to specific research sub-questions. In doing so, the project produced varied, visual data. The initial research questions that produced the above shooting script were taken at Choki School and set the context:

- What is the significance of visual culture in terms of religion?
- What is 'Bhutanese'?
- What are the Choki School's expectations?
- What is expected of me?

The resultant shooting script informed subsequent research sub questions and these were aligned to workshop learning outcomes/activities and other shooting scripts to produce visual data for further evaluation (Table 1).

Table 1

Activity	Description	Learning outcome (LO)	Template (T)
<p>Template 1: <b>Coloured squares</b></p>	<p>Participants worked individually to paint a range of coloured squares and group them by tonal value.</p>	<p>Identify coloured squares of similar tonal value and group in larger blocks of 9 or 4 squares to be used in Activities 2 and 3.</p>	
<p>Template 2: <b>Zhabdrung and central axis</b></p>	<p>Participants worked individually to complete two paintings using this traditional template.</p>	<p>Emphasise tonal values on the template so that the central axis is clearly defined and suitably links the Zhabdrung figure (absent in the template, but the figure's seat remains) with whatever is above as is seen in Bhutanese thangka.</p>	
<p>Template 3: <b>Changing directional light</b></p>	<p>Participants worked individually to complete two paintings that used this traditional template.</p>	<p>Change the direction of light within the landscape template so that it reflects a different time in the day suitable for use in the animation profession, for example, where a landscape may have varying directional light sources according to sunset and sunrise.</p>	

<p>Template 4a: <b>Traditional Coloured Squares</b></p>	<p>The colour palette used in the following Animation activity (4b) was derived from this activity and traditional colours (orange, green, blue and red) used.</p>	<p>Identify coloured squares of similar tonal value and hue, and group in larger blocks of 9 or 4 squares to be used in the Animation activity and to combine at the exhibition.</p>	
<p>Template 4b: <b>Animation</b></p>	<p>Participants worked together as a group to paint 74 stills of this template featuring a new composition, the VAST Bhutan logo and the traditional, auspicious fish symbol. In Buddhism, the fish represents good fortune, fertility and abundance as they have the ability to move in water. In each painting, the light moved from within the head to the tail of the fish symbol.</p>	<p>Reflect on learning acquired in Activities 1-3 and cooperating as a whole class, create an animation for an exhibition.</p>	

*Critical visual methodology*

Like the other visual methods used in this research, a ‘critical visual methodology’ was deemed appropriate due to its emphasis on visuals in providing ‘a framework for exploring the almost equally diverse range of methods that scholars working with visual materials can use’ (Rose, 2016, p.24).

This methodology evaluates objectives and research sub questions, in four sites:



Figure 18: Site of Production, where an image is made (Rose, 2016, pp.24-32). Pictured are workshop participants painting 74 stills to create an animation.

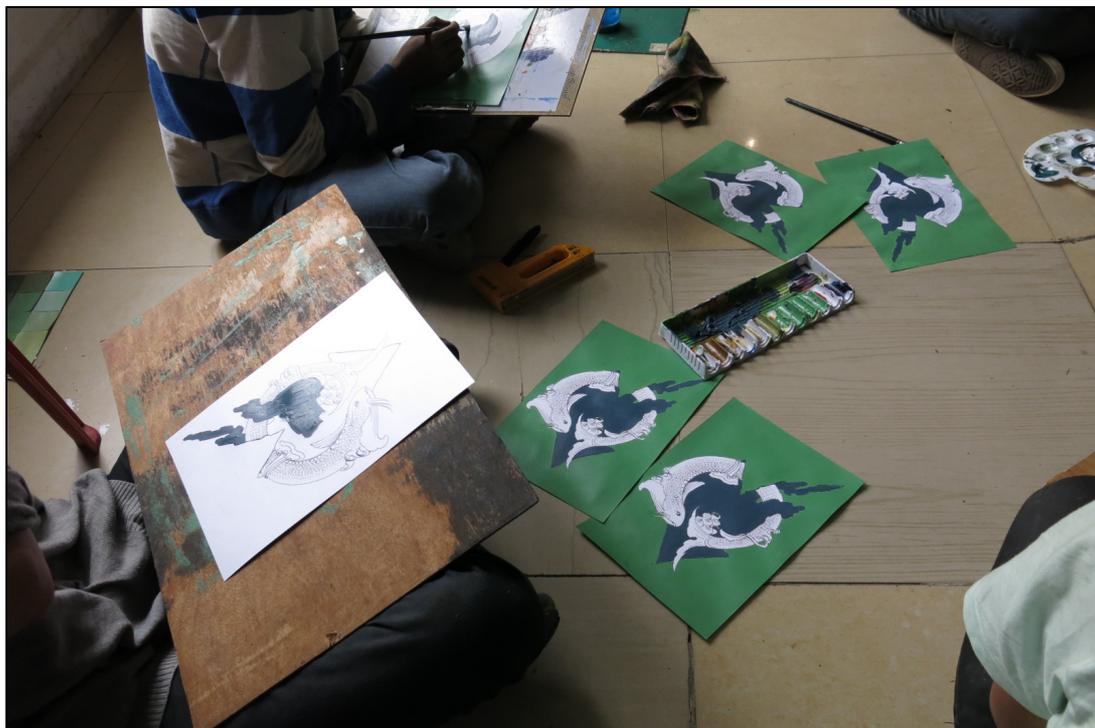


Figure 19: Site of the Image itself, its visual content (Rose, 2016 pp.32-34). Pictured is the image used to create the animation during the Animation activity.

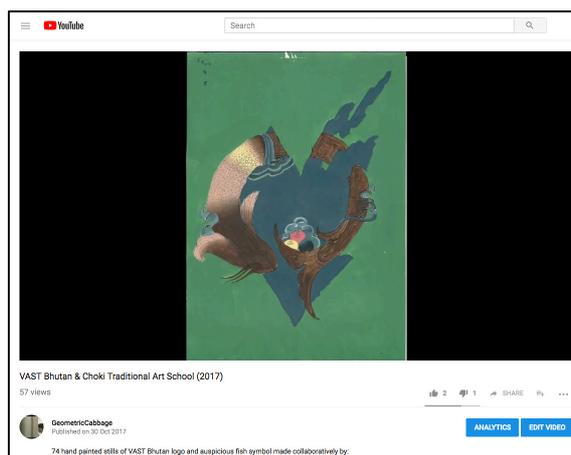


Figure 20: Site of Circulation, where the image travels (Rose, 2016, pp.34-38). Pictured video sharing platform, YouTube screenshot.



Figure 21: Site of 'Audiencing', where the image encounters its spectators or users (Rose, 2016, pp.38-42). Pictured are workshop participants and attendees at *Taming Colour [Bhutan]* exhibition.

Within each of these four sites, are three different aspects or modalities:

The 'social' is 'the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround the image and through which it is seen and used' (Rose, 2016, p.26)

'Compositionality' refers to 'the specific material qualities of an image or 'visual object' such as content, colour and spatial organisation' (Rose, 2016, pp.25-26).

The 'technological' refers to 'any form of apparatus either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision', such as oil paintings, television and the internet (Rose, 2016, p.25).

### Adapting established practice and new technologies

By adapting what has already been established, the outcomes produced during the workshop used interpretive narrative which is also customary in thangka practice and Bhutanese popular culture. Interpretive narrative is a form of expression and method of pairing philosophical anecdote and image in Bhutan. This method is popularly practised on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.



Figure 22: Choki School teacher posing in front of the Coloured Squares exhibition piece. Post caption: 'In life, when you get into troubles, don't get nervous. Just close your eyes and follow your heart, heart may be left, but it's always RIGHT'. Image: Rigden (2017).



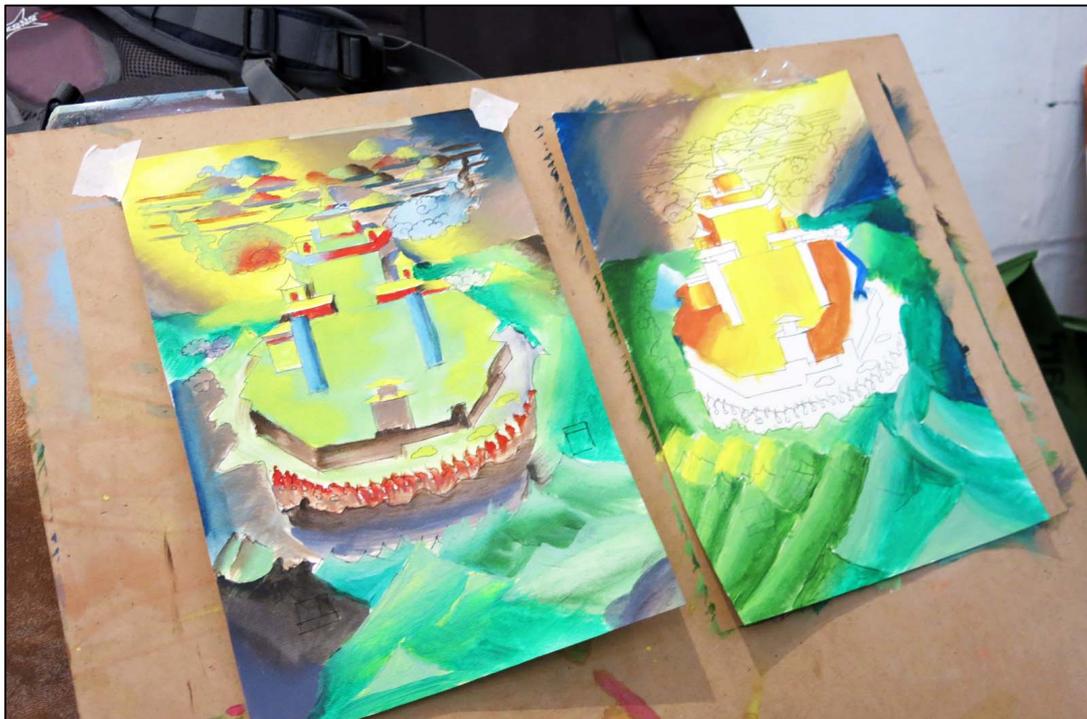
Figure 23: VAST Bhutan member during Coloured squares activity. Caption text: 'Another way of meditation [...] speech, body n mind in one direction'. Image: Sharma (2017)



Figure 24: VAST Bhutan senior member posing in front of Coloured Squares exhibition piece. A comment by another Facebook user in response to the uploaded image: 'And with all the colors that play in our lives, we need to stay grounded and at times just watch them come and go...'. Image: Wangchuk (2017).



Figure 25: As described in my contribution to VAST Bhutan's 20th anniversary publication in describing a VAST Bhutan member's painting, light enters the scene from the left hand side of the frame, reflecting and casting illusionary shadows on architectural pillions. The scene illuminates the right side of the building and contains the left. High mountains block light from entering the foreground regions, separating the viewer and the building.



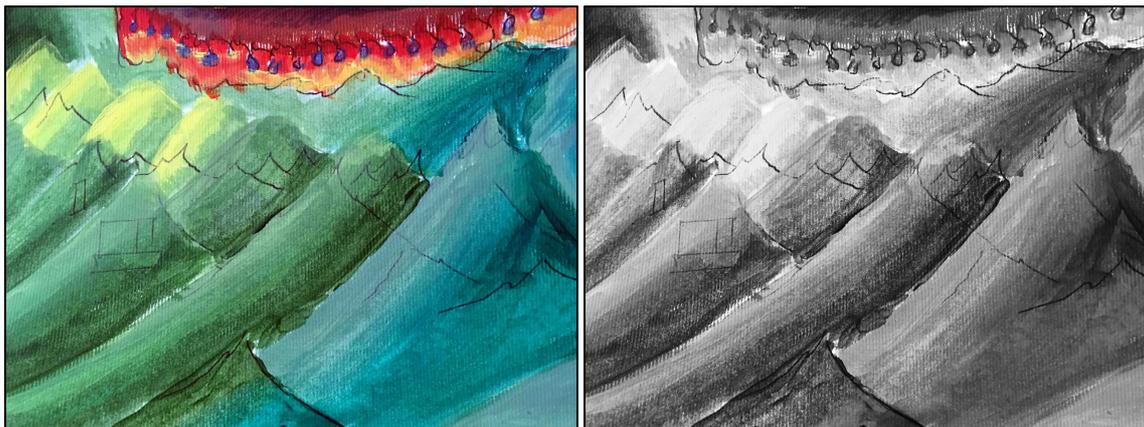


Figure 26a, 26b and 26c. During the workshop, certain elements of the students' practice could be altered to the strength of the traditions surrounding thangka. The perspective of the light source in each thangka creates a fixed, front-on position. Because there are few records and little is written down, it is unclear whether this fixed light source position is canonised by tradition. Two prolific Bhutanese thangka masters commented that if the light source is changed during workshop exercises, as seen in Figure 26, the outcomes were technically not thangka. This did not disrupt or disrespect thangka knowledge or practice. Both thangka masters and Choki School participants agreed that it is beneficial to develop alternative skill-sets that enable an animated image.



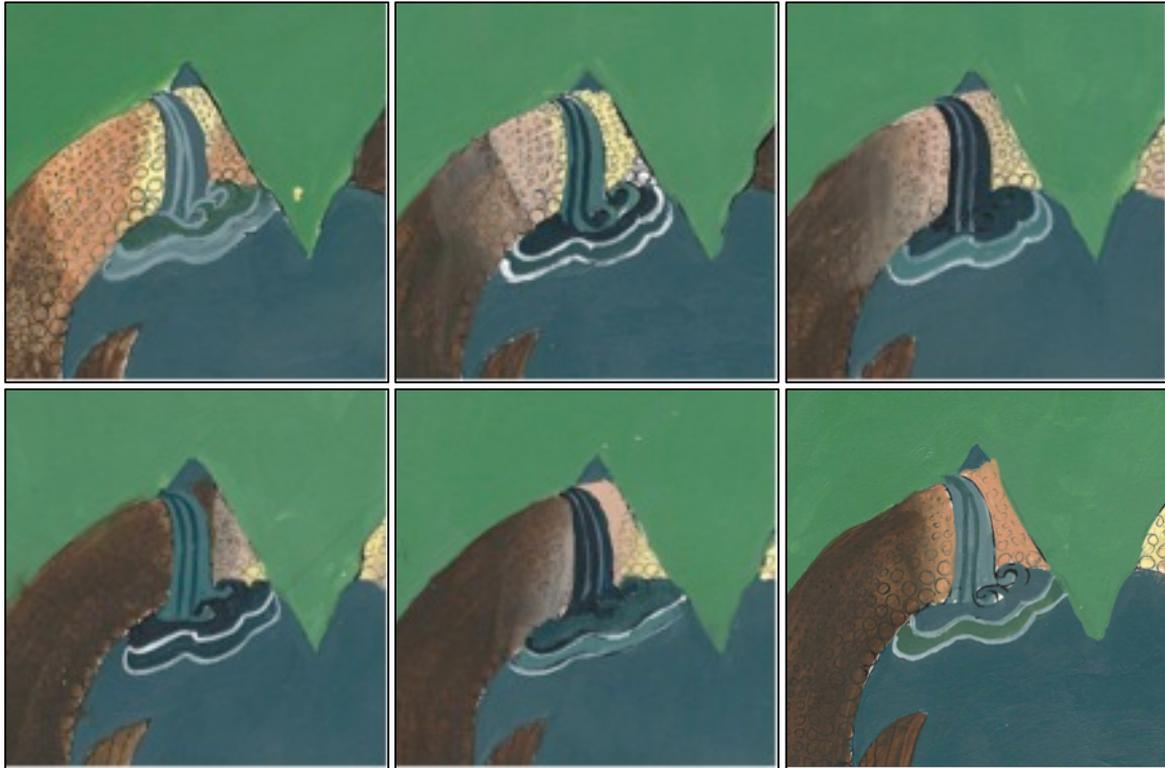
Figure 27: Choki School participants' presentation slide reads: 'At last we had learn how to make an animation by using three dimensional color tone' Photo: Choki (2017).



Figures 28a, 28b and 28c: Images of the Bhutanese Royal family on the walls of Choki School classrooms. A less complex animation template may have been painted more speedily, allowing room for immediate postproduction and uploading online. A template with an image of the Bhutanese royal family would have been a popular theme.



Figures 29a and 29b: Knowledge of participants' prior animation experience, such as the skills seen in Figure 29, would have been beneficial as they could have assisted in creating a simpler, more appropriate animation template, a form of learning known as 'reception learning' (Ausubel, 1968) whereby the teacher manages a class 'but with active student participation' (Biggs and Tang, 2007, p.107).



Figures 30a, 30b, 30c, 30d, 30e and 30d: Details of animation stills 37-42 created during the animation activity. Simpler, more appropriate templates could have used the two-tone rendering technique already established, as they were the most successful parts of the animation.

Future workshops will explicitly enquire about student expertise and enlist their teaching collaboration, especially in classroom situations that use technologies, such as those used within the animation discipline, of which I have a limited understanding.



Figure 31: During the workshop, I learnt the importance of including traditional and non-traditional painting methods. Participants were accustomed to a brushwork technique (Figure 31) called 'dru dang' developed by Thimphu-born Lopen Lhakpa Dorje (Bartholomew and Johnston, 2008, p.281). In dru dang the brush is dry and colours 'are applied in thin layers with meticulous attention to colour gradation' (ibid). Some areas of the background material have very little pigment except for a light wash.

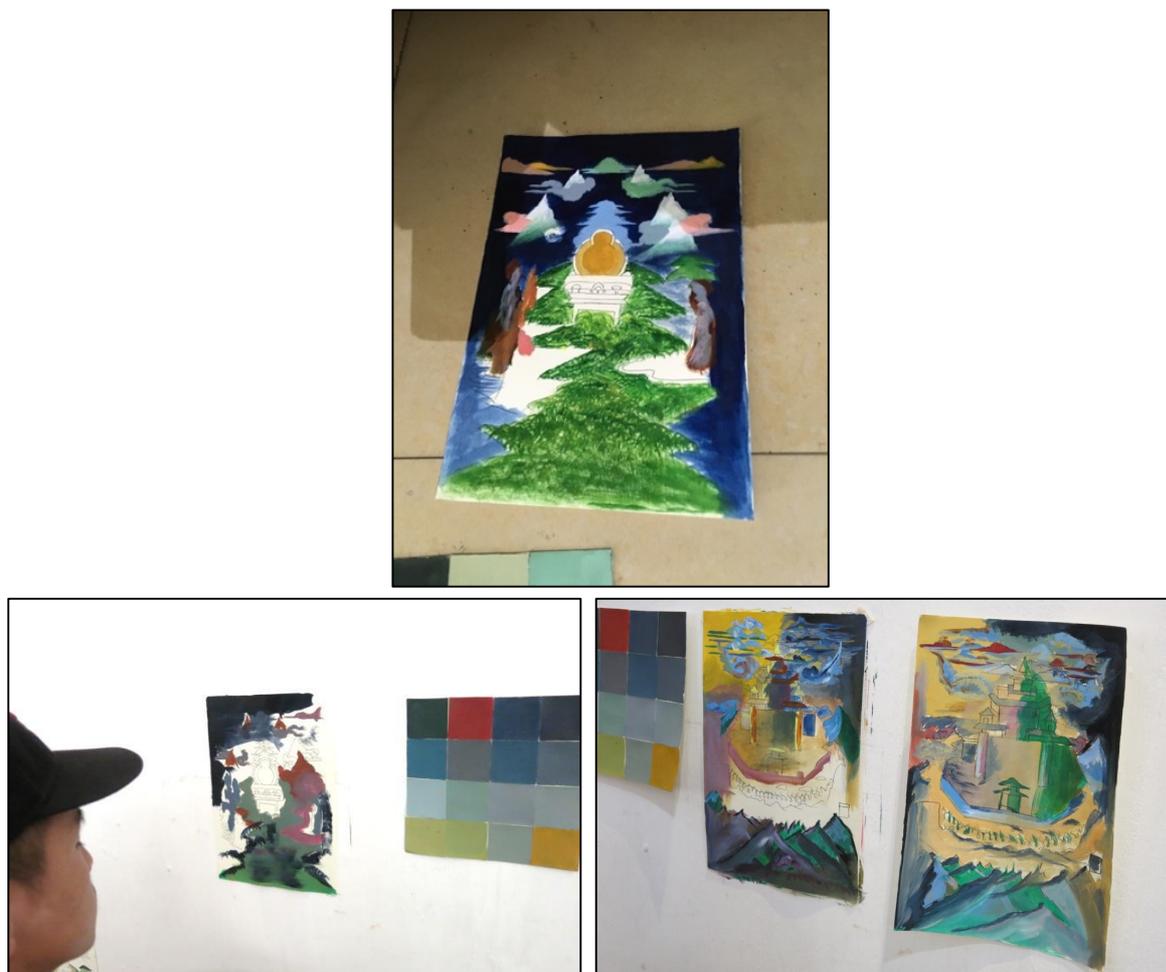


Figures 32a and 32b: As I was not accustomed to the dru dang technique, I demonstrated what I was accustomed to, the 'alla prima' approach. Alla prima is a European brushwork technique where layers of wet paint are administered quickly to previously applied layers of wet paint in one sitting (Boddy-Evans, 2017).

Alla prima was developed by sixteenth century Dutch oil painters and used later in the mid-nineteenth century Impressionist movement as seen in the works of French painter Édouard Manet. After the demonstration, students were able to better understand colour harmonisation, evident when comparing their first and subsequent paintings.



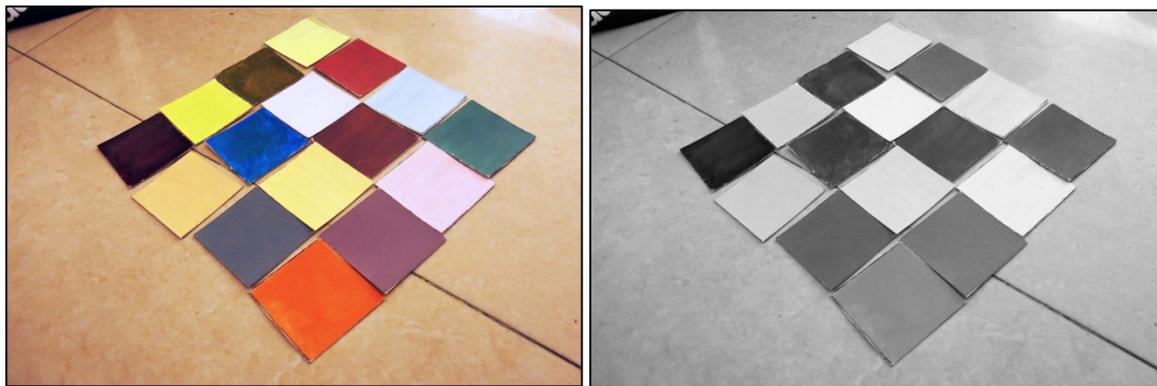
Figure 33a and 33b: A VAST Bhutan participant thinly applied paint during the first Coloured Squares activity where brushstrokes are visible, creating an uneven tone (Figure 33a). A week later (33b), during the Traditional Coloured Squares activity, they applied paint more thickly.



Figures 34a, 34b and 34c: A participant's progression, before (34a) and after the alla prima demonstration (34b and 34c).



Figures 35a, 35b and 35c: During the Animation activity, participants brought in their own brushes to paint certain pictorial elements, with dru dang technique and other elements, using alla prima and enabling adaptation rather than the replacement of their own practice.



Figures 36a and 36b: During the first Coloured Squares activity, participants were encouraged to 'check' tonal accuracies without technological aids, such as the black and white filters of their smartphones. I had to readdress my educational values when participants worked at a fast and engaging pace when using smartphone filters, and produced interesting and varied results such as the check-effect square pictured clearly visible when rendered black and white.



Figures 37a, 37b, 37c and 37d. One week after the workshop end, Choki School participants presented their work to the whole school (37a). This further relayed the workshop aims and outcomes, as part of which they attributed learning to the black and white smartphone filter. One of the main presentation slides reads: 'If we look to our smart phone, [we] see real three dimensional' (37b). Photos: Choki (2017).



Figures 38a, 38b, 38c and 38d: The smartphone was also used during the Coloured squares activity to view tonal harmonisation when participants' outcomes joined together. *VAST Bhutan space is modular, and adapted to meet the needs of the activity it will host, such as an exhibition, art class or atelier etc. This allowed room for movement and experimentation, for example, where participants and passers-by were able to view the joined coloured squares outcomes through the black and white filters of their smartphones.*

The modular working space allowed participants to engage in other types of viewing experiences and created a 'sense of awe at the power of an overwhelmingly visual experience' (Holly in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey, 2005, p.88).



Figure 39: The outcomes produced at the workshops were showcased at an exhibition called *Taming Colour [Bhutan]*. The flyer was shared by VAST Bhutan administration staff via social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. I was not aware that the national public holiday 'Blessed Rainy Day' occurred on the same day, meaning that few attended and it was only installed for half a day.

Fortunately, interest generated online was not dependent on knowledge of local events and generated longer lasting effects than the physical display, evident after the exhibition when participants and prominent VAST Bhutan members posted photographs and anecdotes on social media platforms.



Figure 40: VAST Bhutan Executive Director posing in front of Coloured Squares piece at the exhibition posted on Instagram. Image: Zangmo (2017)

Those pictured in front of the Coloured Squares exhibition piece received hundreds of 'likes' which are when a Facebook or Instagram account holder indicates that they find the image posted appealing. 'Likes' are an indication of those who have at least viewed the piece online.

The Coloured Squares exhibition piece was transformed within the photographic frame and focus on the foreground figure and the background colours harmonizes in-and-out, with the blur effect creating an enhanced awareness of tone and 'organization of planes' (Itten, 1970, p.42), further translating on social media platforms.



Figure 41: VAST Bhutan member posing in front of Coloured Squares exhibition piece. Photo: Rinzin (2017)

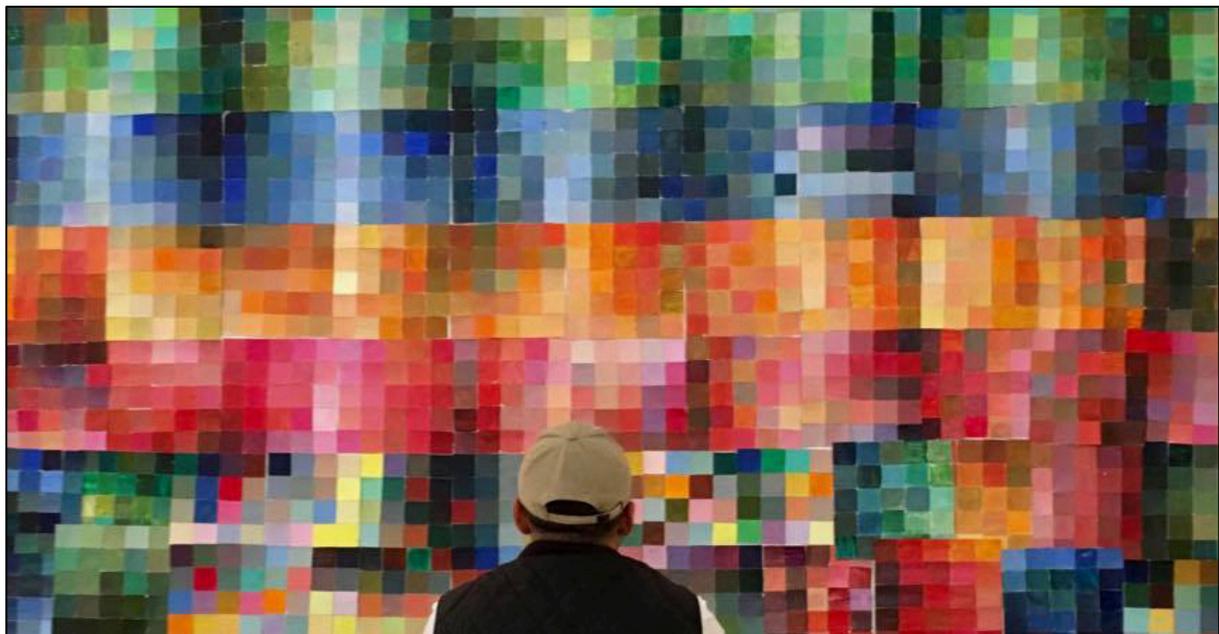


Figure 42: VAST Bhutan senior member pictured facing Coloured Squares exhibition piece.

## Conclusion

This article reveals that recent changes affecting traditional Bhutanese painting are the introduction of acrylic paints and the widespread use of online social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Traditional practice is still upheld though these current social media trends suggest adjustments (especially in matters related to colour harmonisation and 3D rendering) could be made within the traditional painting curriculum, without compromising traditional practice, in order to continue engaging young artists and equip them with relevant skills. Project aims are better communicated in visual or photo essay format as it focuses on visual subject matter (i.e. painting) and as workshop outcomes were visual.

Teaching methods were developed to produce a number of culturally specific and non-specific strategies that HE art teachers can use in educational settings populated with students from unknown or mixed cultural backgrounds. The colour study workshop was developed to engage participants to adapt established skills to complexities by encountering unfamiliar ideas using traditional and new technologies. A combination of traditional and non-traditional methods successfully transferred online.

Findings included:

- Utilising Interpretive narrative in outcomes evaluation allowed the development of a teaching practice relevant to the context
- Changing the perspective of the light source enabled participant engagement in the animation discipline
- Relaying ideas with popular subject matter and student expertise
- Drawing on a range of technical histories to enable adaptation; Incorporating smartphones technology in lesson plan
- The advantages of modular and online 'exhibition' spaces.

I have been invited back to Bhutan by VAST Bhutan for further work that draws on my expertise. The time leading up to this further visit will be used to refine the workshop methods and future work will likely involve a larger number of participants.

## Acknowledgements

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## Biography

*Talitha Balan* teaches visual research methods as a Visiting Practitioner for UAL Academic Support and the Central Saint Martin's Museum and Study Collection. She has completed an MA in Academic Practice in Art, Design and Communication in the Teaching and Learning Exchange at UAL. Artworks created to support her pedagogic and research practices were made during a 2017 artist-in-residence at Art Matters community studio (Richmond Fellowship, UK) and her landscape photomontages have been featured in publications such as *Topiaria Helvetica* (2015) for the Swiss Society for Garden Culture (SGGK).