Photo: Jonathan Greet, 2013.
Govinda Sah was born in 1974 in the town of Rajbiraj, which lies close to the Indian border in the low-lying Terai region of south-eastern Nepal. As one of six children he enjoyed drawing far more than any of his other school subjects, much to the annoyance of his parents who hoped he would go on to study science or engineering. So they nicknamed him ‘Azad’, meaning ‘freedom’, on account of his fiercely independent spirit. At the age of sixteen Govinda left his family home and moved to Delhi, where he worked as a sign painter for several years, before moving to the industrial suburb of Gurgaon, where he worked in a similar capacity at the Maruti Suzuki car factory. After four years in India he returned to Nepal to enroll in the College of Fine Art in Kathmandu, in 1996, holding his first solo exhibition there in 1999. In the millennial year of 2000, Govinda undertook a cycle tour through Nepal during the height of the Maoist insurrection, with the innocent aim to ‘spread the awareness of peace through art for the 21st century’. He then went on to have solo exhibitions in Mumbai, India, and in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and graduated with a BA in Fine Art from Kathmandu’s Tribhuvan University in 2003, before finally moving to the UK, where he qualified with an MA in Fine Art at Wimbledon Art College in London, the city in which he is now based.

Govinda’s early paintings were mainly figurative, as he began to copy the forms of Hindu deities from the Newar pantheon, and landscapes inspired by the temples, terraced foothills, and snow-capped Himalayan peaks that dominate the now congested environment of the Kathmandu Valley. It was from these otherworldly regions with their ever-changing cloudscapes that Govinda first began to study and depict cloud formations as primal symbols of fertility, creativity and heaven. Some of his abstract cloud compositions appear in this exhibition, which emotively evoke the brooding and stormy violence of water in all its oceanic, vaporous and precipitating forms. These creative elements also appear in his three-dimensional installation, where amorphous clouds hover above the floating geological structure of Mount Meru, with suspended rocks hanging above a nest-like circle of branches and stones.

I have been enthralled by the raw energy, luminous colour intensity, and the sensitive chaos created by a multi-dimensional mass of fragmented and globular textures that explode across the square surface in many of Govinda Sah’s more recent paintings. The celestial realms of Govinda’s art possess their own unique luminosity. Some of his paintings emerge from a background of newsprint; others emanate from around an empty hole, or cascade down like monsoon cloudbursts above a churning ocean, while others fit together like spaced tiles to form a mosaic-like composition.

Govinda used the Sanskrit title “Shristi-Chakra”, meaning the “Glorious Wheel of Creation”, for his recent 2012 show in Delhi, which utilizes the mandala principle of depicting a tantric geometric diagram or ‘device’ (yantra) as the divine source of emanation at the centre, around which a centrifugal mass of nebulous and fractal-like energies swirl. Govinda equates these energies with our ever-increasing philosophical and scientific understanding of both the microcosm and macrocosm: of the non-locality of pure consciousness that ‘lights-up’ and informs the reductive neural networks of our brains, and the formless existence of dark matter and dark energy that permeates and informs the unfathomable intelligence of the visible universe we perceive.

Govinda recognizes that his artistic roots first germinated from the unique fusion of Hindu and Buddhist Tantric traditions that are found in Nepal. But his now blossoming personal style of painting increasingly encompasses the visionary realms of intergalactic fields; where stars are born amidst the nebulous ghosts of supernovae in divine acts of cosmic creation, where life is conceived in the mist, and not in the crystal.

LEFT: Cloud Dust, 2013. Oil and acrylic on jute, 150 x 150 cm.

ABOVE: Star Dust, 2013. Acrylic on canvas, 90 x 90 cm.
Gerard Houghton: Govinda, please tell me a little about where you come from originally.

Govinda Sah: I was born in Rajbiraj, in eastern Nepal, south of Everest and just 12 km. from the Indian border. Most people there are subsistence farmers, growing rice, wheat and various vegetables on good fertile land. But, in the rainy season, because of immense natural forces, the Kosi river frequently bursts its banks, causing disastrous flooding with many people losing their lives and lands. Overall, it's a difficult area in which to survive and can be very frightening. I was the fourth of six children, and my parents had to work hard to feed and look after us properly. My mother, though illiterate, was a very clever woman who, having struggled her whole life, was determined her children should get a proper education so as to avoid all that.

Gerard Houghton: How did you first become interested in Art?

Govinda Sah: Well, I was a very shy boy, forever hiding in corners, and spent a lot of time by myself. But, I was always interested in how things worked, so if something like a radio fascinated me, I’d open it up to try to understand where the sounds came from. I managed to break all kinds of things that had worked fine until I dismantled them, so my parents were scared whenever they saw me playing with anything. I’d try to sketch things out to understand them better, until I had whole notebooks full of drawings of the insides of things. Instead of encouragement, though, I usually got punished. Since my family couldn’t afford any extra paper, I’d cut pages from my brothers’ school-books to make my own sketch-books. I couldn’t stop myself, and when they discovered another missing page, they’d beat me. The local school only taught standard subjects like English and Maths. ‘Art’ was never mentioned or thought in any way useful. Still, I was determined to draw things even though no one taught me. It just came out of my own head, really. I tried to record things exactly, and felt good seeing the tangible results of each drawing.

Gerard Houghton: But you must have seen some images, photographs or maybe statues in temples?

Govinda Sah: My mother was very religious and she had posters of deities she prayed to, so I copied all those. Then there’d be photographs of kings and people in books and I’d try to copy them too. At first I only used pencil, but next I experimented with colours from nature, using flowers or other parts of plants, or I’d use different clays to add colours to my drawings. My brothers teased me by saying that after high school I’d have to go to science college! That worried me, because I wasn’t any good at anything except Maths. Since I loved working things out, solving number problems was easy for me. But in reality, I just wanted to be left alone to draw. So, the day after finishing my high school exams, I took a train with a friend and we left for Delhi.

Gerard Houghton: How old were you then, and what prompted you to go to India?

Govinda Sah: I was sixteen, and that was my first time away from Rajbiraj. In the village I’d already started painting buses, trucks and things, to help support the family. My friend was a housekeeper in Delhi and he told me that there were many painting jobs there. In Delhi, I apprenticed to a sign-painter who first had me paint walls, but eventually taught me to paint signs. I lived in his shop and in the middle of the night I’d paint by myself to learn how to write. Once I’d set my mind to it I learned very quickly, and after a few months was confident that I could open my own shop as a sign-painter. My first business, Ashoka Art, lasted for two years, before I became the advertising agent for a big electronics manufacturer, doing all of their painted advertising on walls in Delhi and beyond. I worked by myself and travelled all over the place to ‘spread the message’. But because I was lonely, I moved to the Maruti Suzuki factory in Gurgaon sharing a room with seven young Nepalese labourers. We were friends and we’d cook for ourselves, and all slept on the same floor. By then, I was being hired by the hour as a professional painter, so I was earning better money. I wasn’t interested in the money for myself but would send my earnings back home to my family. I lived very
frugally, only buying the basic things for myself, and never wanted lots of material possessions. I was vegetarian, didn’t drink and lived very simply with a basic philosophy: do the karma and don’t worry about anything else!

Gerard Houghton: Even though ‘painting’ was supporting both you and your family, you still wouldn’t call yourself an artist. How did that transition happen?

Govinda Sah: After nearly five years in India, I returned to Kathmandu to help my elder brother, who’d been accepted to study Science in college. My father was ill and so all the responsibility fell on me to support my parents and help with my brother’s tuition fees. I quickly found a job in a sign-painting shop. One day, on my way to work, I came upon some painted canvases drying in the sun. What amazed me most was they were exactly the sort of work I’d always dreamed of doing. I knocked on the door and an older man came down. I told him directly that I wanted to learn to paint like him. This man, called Krishna Gopal Ranjit, was a highly-respected artist in Nepal, but he said his teaching days were over. He must have seen my face drop because, in a kinder tone, he added that, if I showed him some of my drawings, he might give me some advice. So, forgetting about work, I raced home and spent that day painting a landscape of majestic mountains in full moonlight. When I took it back that same day he was surprised, but after looking it over carefully told me I ought to go to the Fine Art College to study painting seriously. I accepted this advice and took him as my guru. But first, I needed my brother’s permission, since I was supporting him
financially. Then, with his blessing, I applied to Art College, and was selected the next term. Finally, at the age of twenty-one, I was following my dream.

Gerard Houghton: Tell me about your time at the Fine Art College in Kathmandu.

Govinda Sah: At first, I was so excited! I raced around the campus asking everyone I met, ‘How do you draw?’ People told me to calm down and said I’d learn eventually. The syllabus in Nepal was based on western painting techniques: still-life, anatomy, landscape and so on. My guru’s specialty was oil-painting and, because I’d used enamel paints for sign-painting, I was already familiar with oils. However, he told me not to use oil-paints, but to try water-colours instead, to get a sense of the way colours combine together. So every day, I’d paint from 5 to 10 a.m. cycling to small villages around Kathmandu to draw houses, landscapes, anything to practise compositional exercises using watercolours. I really enjoyed this training, and even if I couldn’t quite control the lines, my teacher would later explain how. Then, I’d head off to my small sign-painting shop in Thamel, where I’d work on other commissions. Those were busy times, but I paid my tuition fees and managed to support my family and my elder brother with his degree as well. Eventually, I spent even longer at College than my brother, finishing my Bachelor’s degree in 2003 before studying abroad, first in Bangladesh, and then moving to London to complete another Masters degree at Wimbledon College of Art, in 2008.

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Gerard Houghton: How could you make enough to support all those different projects?

Govinda Sah: As an artist there are always real-world costs. Minimally you need to buy brushes, paints and paper just to survive. Luckily, I received several major commissions for large canvases, 3 by 10 metres in total, for exhibitions in Vienna, Austria and in Hanover, Germany. My first solo show, in 1999, was also successful and other commissions sprang from that. But eventually, to continue my studies abroad, I needed the help of a serious patron, without whose assistance on all levels I couldn’t have made it alone. In 2000, though, I still managed to fund an 80-day cycle tour crossing from eastern to western Nepal, during which I painted 72 oil-paintings displaying the amazing diversity of peoples and places in my country. I wanted to travel and see everything through the lens of my art. My idea was total immersion in art: go on the road, paint on the streets, stop in schools to teach people about art, give hands-on demonstrations of how to paint in local villages and so draw attention to the importance of art itself. That was at the height of the Maoist insurgency, in 2000, a dangerous time to be travelling, but I protected myself with the mantra: ‘The 21st Century is the Century of Art and Peace’ and I received wonderful hospitality, held many shows and established local artist groups all along the way.

Gerard Houghton: In those days, you painted in quite a different representational style, more in the vein of artists like K.G. Ranjit and M.M. Poon?

Govinda Sah: My prime inspiration was the marvellous mountains, which surround the Kathmandu valley. I concentrated on the local scenery before filling in the skyscape as background. Gradually I began to see how clouds formed around the static mountains, and realised that the moving cloud shadows affected the way those mountains appeared. Intrigued by this insight, I started observing clouds more closely, until they became my primary focus. In many cultures clouds serve as symbols of creation, fertility or inspiration and various deities often appear in clouds. Rainclouds connect heaven and earth and are essential to life, sustaining the lives of all creatures, and yet people prefer to ignore them. Because cloud forms seem abstract, my first studies tended towards abstraction, but the closer I investigated clouds the more my style became hyper-realistic. I’d watch them form, become darker and threatening, developing into storms, or dissipate and become benign. I’d see them as beautiful, romantic, mysterious, disturbing or even menacing. In their changeability clouds symbolize nature’s emotional sequences and seem to reflect the variability of the human condition. The same person can get angry – an access of emotion – or be ecstatic, or sad or in despair, and
these emotions show different aspects of that individual. So emotions began to surface spontaneously within my cloud studies, and these constantly shifting energy patterns, both inner and outer, intrigued me. In works like *Emotion in Motion, Emanate* and *Wonder* I’m exploring the interface between emotions and clouds, using both as metaphorical representations of energy transforming between different states. Such things are easier to represent visually than to describe in words. Clouds become a visible means of revealing the wonders of the invisible.

Gerard Houghton: It’s interesting you mention emotions in the context of landscapes and clouds. John Constable writes somewhere that the sky is every landscape painter’s ‘greatest aid’ and ‘the chief “organ of sentiment.”’

Govinda Sah: He’s right! I already knew Constable’s wonderful cloud studies in Kathmandu. Turner and Constable were my two heroes, and even though I couldn’t afford them I bought a few expensive books about their paintings, and very deliberately studied what they were doing. I became fascinated the more I looked at their ideas and the techniques they used to depict natural scenery. Turner was important for me because of how he managed light. Following his lead I based my own work upon the movement of light, and my paintings follow the light. A ray of light is razor sharp, and that sharpness creates this world of illusion. We use light to see things, and the play of light and perspective...
defines a set of geometric rules that the eye interprets strictly. On the other hand, Constable, was the master of clouds, rendering the changeableness of weather systems, which he also studied scientifically. I followed him in looking closely at the way clouds form and how best to represent them. My early figurative works clearly show their influences, and a careful glance at Salvation, Empyreal, Cloud Dust, Life/Light, etc. demonstrates how both still inform my work today.

Gerard Houghton: Did Turner and Constable’s being English influence your decision to move to London to continue your painting studies?

Govinda Sah: You’ll laugh at me for this, but when I first arrived in London, in 2007, and saw the Turners at Tate Britain, I became so excited by all the extra details I’d never seen before. But, I’d no idea Turner was from England! I hadn’t bothered to read the text in those books, but just gone straight to the pictures! When I first saw the actual works, it was as though I was filled with the spirit of this artist who taught me so many things. What Turner did was really extraordinary, and I consider myself – honestly – to be one of his disciples. I schooled myself to follow him closely, and it was to capture lighting effects like his that I painted in the early hours of the morning. Later, when I saw Constable’s paintings at the National Gallery, I realised I was living in the place which produced these two great masters. So, whilst not prompting the move, it definitely confirmed how right I was to come to England. That’s Karma, if you like!

Gerard Houghton: I’ve always seen your earlier work as modern Nepalese, and your later work as a western development away from it, so it’s interesting that you were integrating western techniques from well before. Could you tell me about the genesis of your later style?

Govinda Sah: I think good teachers find good students, and good students will always search out good teachers. I was immensely lucky to chance upon K.G. Ranjit when I did. At college, I discovered Turner and Constable and absorbed everything I could from them in a very productive virtual apprenticeship. Then, at Wimbledon I studied with the painter Geraint Evans, who pushed me in other ways entirely. When I showed him my latest cloud studies, he said, ‘Govinda, what are you trying to say?’ I’d no idea what sort of question that was, let alone how to reply; it turned my world upside down. I painted clouds because I wanted to paint clouds! I didn’t expect to have to justify it to anyone. It took a while to realise it was a matter of cultural difference. Nepal is a totally different cultural matrix, a way of being based on different premises. We do things without always asking why; the answer’s already understood, so, in Nepal, we don’t need to question. Here, everyone questions everything, and you must be able to explain things precisely too. This was a completely new approach for me. At first, I really struggled to find questions to ask myself, but gradually started to develop that necessary sense for a good question. Here, one learns to ask: How is it different? Why is it like that? What does that mean? And this western habit of probing differences unconsciously invokes a duality, expecting an ‘either/or’ answer, like lightness or darkness, hot or cold.

Gerard Houghton: Surely some of your own titles, like Illusion and Truth, or Presence and Absence suggest similar dichotomies.

Govinda Sah: Well, ‘and’ is the important word here. I see these titles as suggesting limits between which the subject is located, as in works like In Between and Within. Based on complementarity, the eastern way of thinking works better with ‘both/and’ types of answers. Of course the twin poles of ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ are distinct, but all the points in between also exist at the same time, like with the Chinese idea of Yin and Yang. Many of my paintings can be read as either microscopic or macroscopic in scale. Yet I want them to be both micro and macroscopic simultaneously. It’s an important distinction. Then, my work becomes an abstract meditation on the wonders of the whole universe and of the spectacular natural phenomena contained therein, irrespective of