

Painting the Self in a Study of Modernity • Using Art in Anthropological Research

Academic Essays

ABSTRACT

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In this article, I propose the application of the concepts of ‘small’ and ‘big’ stories theorised by Lyotard (1984) to the discipline of visual anthropology by focusing on the issues of ‘generalisation’ and ‘individuality’. The primary question on which I focus is: ‘how do we integrate individual case-studies with generalisations in anthropological research in a way that provides a balanced account of small and big stories?’. To answer this question, I share the theoretical and methodological challenges of using art within my recent research in Nepal (2017-2020), in which I discuss the making of individual selves in relation to kinship, gender and conflict in the context of a problematic dichotomy between modernity and tradition. This method I have defined elsewhere as the ‘art-tool’, an approach which combines art and written anthropological narrative. The final result of this methodology is what I call here the ‘research canvas’. I argue that there are various creative phases throughout a research in both its written and visual outcomes, and that the research canvas is only the final stage. This is a complex creation in which various insights are combined through semiotic codification. I suggest here that in using this methodology, the artist-anthropologist can provide an extensive account of all the relations occurring within a research project, including the subjectivity of the author and the mediation between generalisation and individual narratives.

keywords: generalisation, kinship, modernity, Nepal, self, subjectivity, tradition, visual methods

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The moon was once believed to be a god, but now humans have been there, so we know that it was wrong.

(field notes, January 2019)

We cannot continue to regard the 'writing up' of ethnographic work as innocent. On the contrary, a thorough recognition of the essential reflexivity of ethnographic work extends to the work of reading and writing as well. We must take responsibility for how we choose to represent ourselves and others in the texts we write.

(Hammersley & Atkinson 2006, p. 258).

Anthropology is a work of art. It is about making a puzzle and solving it, but as making and solving are synchronic processes, it can be a tricky task to accomplish. This is where art comes into it. In my research in Nepal among the Newar people of Bhaktapur (2017-2020), I met and talked to hundreds of local people, and formally interviewed more than one hundred on several topics. Discussing with them their ideas and feelings about what the process of modernity entails, and on the role of tradition in their society, I found that what matters to them is the construction of their own selves

balancing between what the others think and want from them, and what they themselves desire.

This process of self-construction comes as the result of 'modernisation' or 'development' (Nepali: *bikas*), seen by the people as both a historical phase followed by substantial economic changes (the end of the dictatorial regime of the Rana kings in 1950 and the beginning of democracy after a bloody civil war and the consequent opening up of the country to rest of the world after 100 years of forced isolation) and an epistemological phase in which social relations are reshaped and social and cultural values are negotiated. This takes place in a dialectic discourse between old established notions of the person as a pawn on a pre-established social stage and new ideologies of freedom of determination (Levy 1991, Nepali 1965). The latter involves a refusal of the hierarchical systems which were perpetrated by the kings and religious institutions.

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On another hand, the process of self-construction encompasses a reflection over the concept of a 'moral person' (Nepali: *naitika vyakti*) and it is accompanied by a high degree of conflictuality within changing households and within people's own *mana* (which means 'heart-mind' as opposed to *dimaag* which means 'brain-mind'), leading to a phenomenon of interior sufferance referred to as *mana kharlhagu*, which literally means 'heart-talk', described to me as a sense of loneliness and extreme sufferance (Nepali: *Dukha*). Within this process, people might choose different 'moral' pathways, by following, refusing or rather adapting prescribed social roles, kinship relations and magico-religious beliefs. In this conglomeration of individual narratives and interpretations, I found that all the respondents portrayed development as a flow of change marked by paradoxes and contrasts. Consequently, besides my doctoral thesis, I have developed a corpus of artworks in which I have tried to represent the flow of this process of development and its problemat�city as well as individual perspectives.

After reflecting on individual case-studies in some preliminary works, I then tried to balance what people said and what they did with my own interpretations within a final larger work in an attempt to combine 'small' and 'big' stories. With these concepts, philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) referred to the contrast between theories over society and knowledge, such as the idea of progress, scientific truth and freedom, as opposed to the micronarratives of individuals. According to him, the postmodern philosophical thought itself is characterised by the acknowledgement of diversity and irreconcilable incompatibility of people's perspectives, beliefs, dreams and

desires, and as such it supports the role of micronarratives as an epistemological pathway.

In this project I refined an artistic methodology to be used in anthropological research on which I have been working on for the last seven years, and which I call the 'art-tool' method (Tine 2017; 2019). The primary methodological question on which this work is focused is how individual case-studies can be integrated with generalisations in anthropological research in a way that provides a balanced account of the many collected stories and also communicates both the informants' and the researcher's point of view. To address these issues, I developed the 'research canvas'. This is a complex creation in which various insights are combined within a semiotic codification, the final stage of a complex research made of various creative phases that correspond to the traditional research steps including data collection, analysis of the material and the final production. This could take the shape of a collage, painting or other creative work in which various insights are combined.

The fact that the research canvas is the final and (possibly but not necessarily) larger work, does not mean that this is the most important work in a research collection. In fact, the individual stories and case-studies are the core of any research. Thus, the advantage of this visual methodology is to underline the importance of these small stories, by making them visually tangible in addition to the written reports of these stories. The visual works, here proposed in the form of paintings, have similar function to photographs of informants and narrative reports of their stories in anthropological works. Think for example of the use of photographs in the monumental book 'Balinese Character' by

Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson (1942) or the artistic photographic work in 'Vita. Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment' by Joao Biehl (2005) in which the main character is shown in some photographs in the confinement of the asylum in which she is secluded.

This endeavour contributes to the ongoing debate over the use of art in anthropological research. In fact, while general consensus has been reached in the last thirty years on the importance of the use of visual methods in the field, the post-fieldwork production of art for the expression of insights is more problematic. The methodology of the research canvas proposed in this article has the advantage of presenting an elaboration of all the research phases within the same work and of expressing the main research findings from both the points of view of the informants and of the researcher through artistic representation. As this project is currently still a work in progress, I will not showcase the research canvas here, but only some of the preparation material.

The Problem of Generalisation

The use of art in anthropology has been proposed as a method of enquiry in recent years (Sweetman 2009, Sullivan 2012, Tine 2017) for its ability to convey a deeper understanding of non-verbal contents than can be achieved through text alone (Banks 2001, Cox & Wright 2012, Prosser & Loxley 2008). A revision in the aims, methods and expressive tools of the discipline and a discussion on the topics of 'subjectivity', 'generalisation' and 'individuality' in ethnography and ethnology is now urgent (Clifford &

Marcus 1986, Marcus & Fisher 1999, El Guindi 2011, Foster 1995). Consequently, the issue of how to incorporate and represent all of the individual stories taken from field research, which has been central in modern anthropological debate, must now be dealt with in the new context of anthropological artistic production.

There are two main objections to the processes of generalisation. The first objection is based on a constructivist perspective according to which each observed phenomenon is time and context specific (Lincoln & Guba 1985) and 'our insight can only be a reconstruction of subjective perspectives of people in specific situations' (Mayring 2007). The second one takes a rationalist or post-positivistic position, arguing that inductive proof from individual sentences is not possible because each theory can always be disproven by occurring exceptions (Popper 1959). In between these two extreme theories, there is what Malcolm Williams (2002) has defined as 'moderatum generalisation'. According to this approach, singular aspects "can be seen as instances of a broader recognizable set of features. This is the form of generalisation made in interpretative research (Mayring 2007, p. 131). Anthropological research generally uses a combination of theoretical framework and comparative literature analysis. Specifically, the former consists of the development of an inductive theory while in the field during which insights are perceived, theorised and verified until saturation is reached, while the latter compares relevant texts on the topic, and can lead to the construction of complex meta-analysis.

Anthropology as Art

The passage from the rough materi-

al to a meaningful text, through theoretical sampling and comparative literature analysis, is the most difficult part of anthropological research, and probably the most misunderstood. This is the passage from ethnography, seen as the collection of material and data in the field, to anthropology per se, seen as the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the research material in a way that attempts to 'convince the reader that we have understood other "forms of life", showing that we have truly been there' (Geertz 1988, p.4). According to Clifford Geertz, anthropology should be seen as a kind of text in which the anthropologist is a creative author.

The construction of the 'writerly identity' (Geertz 1988, p. 7) and of the text itself can be problematic due to the epistemological fear of telling an honest story in an honest way to 'prevent subjective views from colouring objective facts' (Geertz 1988, p. 7). Further complicating the task, according to Geertz, anthropologists are often 'confronted by societies half modern, half traditional; by fieldwork conditions of staggering ethical complexity; by a host of wildly contrasting approaches to description and analysis; and by subjects who can and do speak for themselves' (p.71). He proposed that what anthropology should do is evoking, not representing, under the premise that anthropological work is an act of creation and imagination, and not a lab report (p.136). The resistance to this conception was (and often still is) based on the 'confusion, endemic in the West since Plato at least, of the imagined with the imaginary, the fictional with the false, making things out with making them up' (p.140). Consequently, these resistances now need to be abandoned in favour of anthropology as 'comparable art' (p.139).

In accordance with what Geertz proposed, and starting from this very issue regarding the construction of anthropological texts, which has been long since disregarded as unimportant, and which has led too many anthropologists to be simply ethnographers (Ingold 2008), my proposal is to produce art as an outcome of ethnographic research and anthropological reflection in a way that encompass all the research phases, from the fieldwork to the final work. Thus, this presents the same challenges that scholars normally find when passing from ethnography to anthropology. The technique proposed here involves a multi-phased project, in which reflection occurs within the making, culminating in an all encompassing 'research canvas'.

A combination of collage, new and archival photos and fieldnotes within my paintings helped me to explain the flow of modernity as a process of change and the way in which individual narratives construct a collective social world. Additionally, I attempted to put into practice the representation of the 'world of lived experience' (Ingold 2011), in order to offer a visual insight into what I as the researcher have understood and felt, with the goal of bringing the viewer to participate in the experience of the social actors. Before showing some practical examples of this passage through art, I will summarise my research findings to demonstrate how I have made artistic representations of them.

Modernity and Development

Modernity in Nepal is featured by inter-related material and immaterial changes. The material aspects include improved economic conditions, the elimination of caste, the spread of media,

infrastructures, and education. These conditions allow people to make previously untenable choices, under the influence of new social models of interaction and ideologies that have been propagating through society over the last seventy years. Recent decades have seen this process greatly accelerated. New models of interaction include changing family structures and dynamics, the evolution of social solidarity and the emergence of love and friendship relationships that are based solely on personal choices rather than on traditional affinity of kinship, family, phuki, thar and caste. New ideologies include democracy, capitalism, liberalism, individualism, secularism, scientific thinking and medicine.

In the past, the connections between social groups and individuals were functional to balance the mesocosm between the macro and the micro level, the human and the divine, the known and the unknown, the inside and the outside. In contrast, now this kind of complementarity and cooperation has more selfish motivations and relations are often established for personal gain. In reaction to a hyper controlling society, many people are now seeking caring relationships, based on personal choice. Here one can observe the emergence of the importance of the individual and of personal choices that take precedence over the rest of society. As such, love marriages are progressively acquiring social importance beside arranged marriages; nuclear families are substituting joint families; caste beliefs are giving space to social solidarity; sacrifices are being questioned as respect for life is increasing; friendship groups are replacing the guthi organisations; and parents and children are moving away from the old dynamics of respect towards more open relationships.

Trust is now sought within relationships as it is no longer a certainty dictated by social positions. This shift of perspective and the desire for change and choice against a predefined way of being has been made possible by the process of modernisation, with its ideological influence over social identities, and models of interaction and lifestyle. However, this process is also being heavily resisted by sects of Bhaktapurian society. This can often be seen within enlarged and traditionally structured families, guthis, priests and, to some extent, government policies and attitudes.

However, it should be noted that modernity also means materialism and the adoption of a new commodified way of forming social identities, which is in many ways only superficially freedom of choice. Now modernising social pressures are telling people what to buy and how to behave, leading to conflicts and difficulties in making decisions. Trying to provide a visual account of all of this, I have developed a personal artistic style.

Towards the Research Canvas: Methodology and Style

In this visual project, while passing from individual narratives to interpretations, I have pursued three main goals:

1. To visualise the process of development in Nepal and its paradoxes.
2. To visualise the stories, lives and experiences of respondents, by focusing on the salient moments of epistemological relevance in their lives in the context of socio-cultural change and economic turmoil.
3. To visualise the anthropological process

itself, namely the making of the research from ethnography to anthropology.

To address these goals, I have developed my artistic project over different phases of production. The following scheme shows the passages in the artistic production, seen as visual versions of traditional research phases.

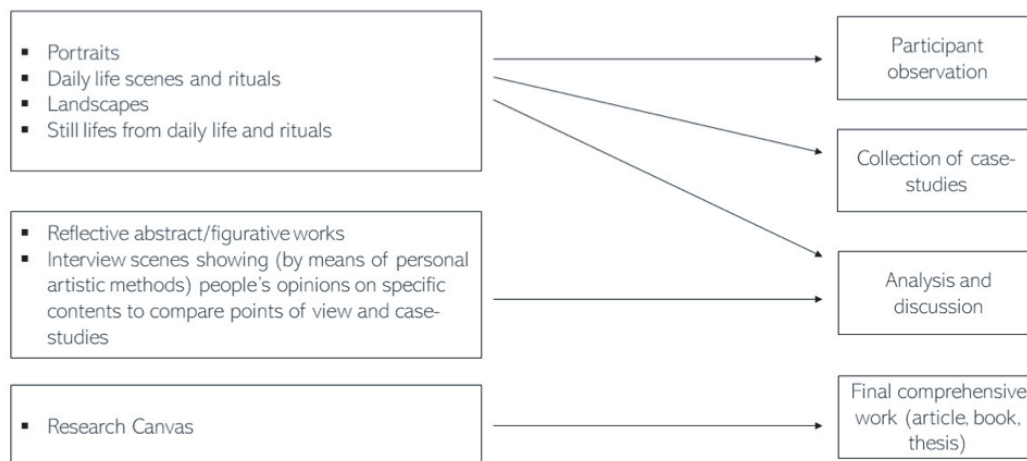


Figure 1: Visual representations of research phases

First of all, I produce some preliminary works, which can either be created while in the field or after. These include portraits, ritual scenes, daily scenes and still lifes of ritual and daily objects. I view this as documentary material equivalent to participant observation. I personally mix this production with digital photographs that I reuse later. In addition to these, there are some more theoretically dense or 'thick' works. These are works representing the subjective experiences of modernity, which are the equivalent of ethnographic material regarding case-studies. These can include reflective and more abstract works that are the fruit of reflection and the imaginative process; interview scenes in which I include my

presence as a researcher (at least a more evident presence than the other works in which it is still there but in the form of an unavoidably partial observer and maker); diversified perspectives on a given topic that reflects the views of the informants; and finally, the research canvas, to which all of the previous phases should lead.

The research canvas is the equivalent of a whole anthropological written work.

Regarding the more stylistic aspects, I have attempted to use diverse artistic methods with the goal of balancing and presenting different points of view. I achieved this by developing a peculiar use of portraits to represent the fragmentary nature of the self and to show its character of construction at the intersection between individuality and society. I have in this way tried to provide a visual account of micronarratives, before creating the final work. The semiotic apparatus has been developed through the use several artistic techniques, such as '*chiaroscuro*' (from the Italian words *chiaro*:light and *scuro*:dark), an artistic techniques

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that builds enlightened scenes in dark settings that I found useful for the subjects representing rituals that address the unknown including death, spirit possession and illness. I also used abstract portraits to convey the sense of feeling lost, with unfinished parts representing the unknown and a colour palette of black and white is used to represent the past. While I will not discuss these choices in any further detail in this article, in the next section I will show some practical examples taken from my doctoral thesis.

Visual Section

Here are some examples from the first and second research phases, which leads to the final work. These images are examples from my visual fieldnotes, or 'small stories', which include portraits, still lifes, and daily and ritual scenes.

While these initial works represent the beginning of my thoughts as they develop in the field, with a similar function

to documentary photography, the works belonging to the subsequent reflexive phase offer a better understanding of my reflections after the fieldwork, and are the preparation of the research canvas. These works are not representative, but rather reflective. In this phase, more complex images are created, using a personal semiotic code, which I argue should always be clearly defined.

For example, in 'The Tradition', I do not represent actual traditions, but rather the way in which I have understood how people see them. Traditions are preserved within all of the elders and middle-aged people who support the symbology and reproduce the daily gestures that make sense to them in their attempt to maintain social codes and roles, mediating between the microcosmos of individual lives and the macrocosm of the deities. In this artwork, these keepers of tradition are represented without their bodies, because the face is the most important part of a person (according to many people), and it is the

Figure 2: 'Newari Man in Traditional Clothes' (image from author)



Figure 3: 'Street Seller of Grains' (image from author)



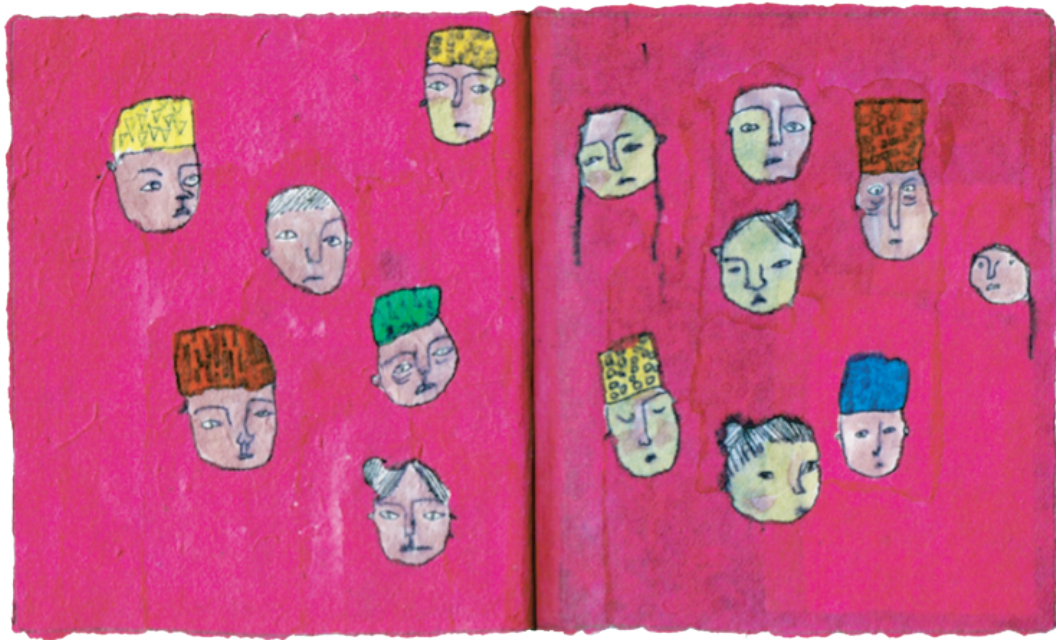


Figure 4: 'The tradition'
(image from author)

place where their identity, and their social respectability is located. A uniform colour in the background substitutes a realistic landscape, because traditions are located on an upper level, a sort of spiritual dimension that transcends space and time. This explanation is a kind of semiotic analysis of my own work that I develop either pre-or-post-making.

Similarly, in the work entitled 'A man', I show again a face without body, but this time a landscape is represented. People cannot exist without their spatial background in which social relations take shape. However, this cityscape is windowless to prevent observation. This basic landscape is the dominium of the thoughts and feeling of this man, his inner dimension. This artwork is already a generalisation that I have made, because the man represented is, in my perception, any man taken in his existential individual dimension.

Finally, in 'Out There in Kathman-

du', which recalls the title of a book investigating modernity in Nepal by Mark Liechty (2010), a group of young people are enjoying themselves in the periphery of Kathmandu, whose buildings are visible in the background, while the moon exists as the only natural element. The moon has appeared in many of my drawings, and I explain this in two ways: the first reason is that nights in Bhaktapur are very dark, there are no lights in the streets and buildings are often dark because many buildings have either been abandoned or have not yet been repaired from the recent 2015 earthquake. Therefore, the moon is a very visible element in Bhaktapurian nights, and it has entered into my imagination. It must have entered the imagination of local people too, and in fact, the second reason is that many interviewees have mentioned that the moon is believed to be a god. However, humans have now been on the moon and this is cited as evidence against the existence of

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gods by more educated people. In the work 'Out There in Kathmandu', the moon is a spatial and temporal connector, with both Bhaktapur and the past. Young people go to Kathmandu to have fun, because it is full of pubs and restaurants that animate the nightlife.

In 'Hierarchy' I attempt to show the narrow-minded and antidemocratic view of many high caste priests (Nepali: *puroits*). Here I have attempted to represent the way in which the general group of priests view social relations. Furthermore, in the collection of faces located in each square of the traditional hat, I have represented smaller images of *puroits* to show the individuality of each of them, the vast majority of whom support similar ideologies. They are the keepers of tradition and the old Sanskrit knowledge of religion and they therefore have power to control the life of each Newar person through the superiority of their knowledge. The big

head at the center of the table may at first evoke the concept of individuality, however, it is in fact the representation of a *puroit* in his generalised form. It symbolises the maintenance of traditional rituals and hierarchies and the support that they provide to the entrenched system of social power.

The table 'Friendship' is about the emerging topic of friendship, one of the key findings in my research. The absence of perspective is an important element in the grammar of this painting. A group of heads on the top of the table show how vertical and horizontal hierarchies (vertical and horizontal heads) are challenged by modernising structures of power and social relations. As reported by the interviewees, friends are important in case of need such as getting to the hospital, to help with cremation in case of death, and to help in case of financial hardship. For the youngest people (new generations), friends are for having fun. Some keywords are present in this table, such as trust, help, fun, health, and these are all topics

Figure 5: 'A man'
(image from author)



Figure 6: 'Out There in Kathmandu'
(image from author)



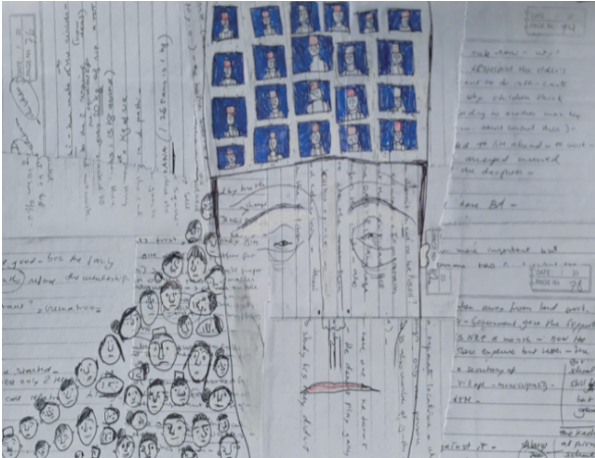


Figure 7: 'Hierarchy'
(image from author)

from my interviews. Friendship and other relations are located between emotions and materialism. On the right side of the table is the head of a priest. His traditional hat and the *tika* (1) on his forehead recall his role as the keeper of the traditions. This is to remind us that some social groups oppose the ongoing social change. Just under this face, a chaos of cars and bikes going in every direction tells the story of chaos in modern Nepal. This is the landscape that I have chosen as a background for this artwork, an element useful for spatial location.

This is the daily landscape for any person who lives in the city, particularly those that go to Kathmandu for work.

Finally, 'In the middle', portrays a man wearing white and with his head shaved. These are the visual cues that he is within a mourning period in which certain restrictions are applied. However, respecting these

cultural restrictions is not easy for him, as his teenager children have different priorities. The episode that inspired this painting occurred on his son's birthday which took place during the mourning period. As the father could not allow a birthday party to take place in the house due to cultural mourning restrictions despite wanting to make his son happy, his son organised a party at the house of a relative from the mother's side, who was not included in the mourning group as they belonged to a different lineage. This created some friction within the house, and while his wife supported the decision of the husband to enforce the rules of mourning, she also suffered to see him upset. The story of this man shows the problematic nature of making the self and the struggle of modernity and offers a reflection on modern fatherhood and on the making of individual priorities. Portraits have become a fundamental artistic form on which I have been experimenting to portray the fragmentary nature of the self.

Figure 8: 'Friendship'
(image from author)



Conclusive Remarks

In this article, I have discussed the use of visual arts, specifically painting, in the discipline of anthropology. I did so by focusing on both theoretically and practical aspects from my research in Nepal in which I investigated the making of the self in relation to kinship, gender and conflict in the context of a problematic dichotomy between modernity and tradition. In the visual production, I attempted to take individual stories into account as well as my understanding of a changing lifeworld, by addressing power issues, social identities, contrasts between generations and evolving relations. Here the problem of generalisation was partially overcome, thanks to the combined use of portraits and of theoretical compositions.

The artworks evolve from visual fieldnotes (which are drawings made in the field or in the process of analysis) to follow up paintings on canvas (in which I represented rituals and daily life scenes, extracts from interviews and research insights). The main difference between artistic outcomes in the various phases of the research are both theoretical and practical. During the initial phase, visual fieldnotes can function as a database for further reflections. This phase is followed by a production of 'reflective drawings', which can be more abstract and less literal, but still figurative. This process of abstraction is a fundamental phase of the research, mirroring the passage from ethnography to anthropology. By showing some extracts from the first stages of my visual work, I have suggested that the research canvas could function as a visual version of anthropological work itself, seen as the result of data analysis and the production of an interpretative form of generalisation.



Figure 9: 'In the middle'
(image from author)

In the research canvas all the passages are present, articulated through a semiotically constructed code of expression, and the combination of all of these reflective images offers a new work with newly constructed contents that are more than the sum of its parts. In this methodology, both a solid research background and the use of a personal style will always be fundamental. In conclusion, I wish to state that it is true that good narratives do not necessarily need images. However, to visualise the informants and their stories can have a powerful effect on the reader, as it can help to immerse them within the 'thick' material. The importance of the use of visual methods here lies in the ability of visual expression to convey a deeper understanding of non-verbal contents than can be achieved through text alone.

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