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CHAPTER ONE

The question of expression when using art as a research method in anthropology: Notes for the anthropologist-artist

Paola Tiné

Introduction

Visual methods in anthropology have become increasingly popular in recent years, and much reflection has been carried out on what art can add to social research.¹ In fact, the connubium between art and anthropology opens up to new methodological and epistemological queries, such as how specific themes should be communicated through the means of visual methods.

Some general criteria to establish the anthropological validity of visual work have been defined by the American Anthropological Association (AAA). By polarizing art and anthropology as two distinct disciplines, these guidelines affirm the importance of ethnography as the necessary link between them. According to these specifications, ‘visual media convey critical forms of knowledge that written accounts cannot’ and ‘the content of ethnographic visual media is necessarily based on research’ (Society for Visual Anthropology [2001] 2015). Moreover, the AAA states that ‘while ethnographic media provide access to visual and acoustic worlds of practice and belief, they also make available opportunities to contemplate

and experience the relationship between theory and observations from the field' (Society for Visual Anthropology [2001] 2015). In sum, following these orientations, to be academically and anthropologically valid, a work of art has to be the result of ethnographic research conducted in the field with classical qualitative methods. The follow-up analysis and production of visual material can be a very useful resource, if appropriately used, in developing that 'thick' understanding (using a term coined by Geertz 1988), which is proper in an anthropological inquiry.

While the importance of ethnography as a background to artistic productions has become established, at least theoretically, in anthropological works using visual arts, a reflection of the interrelation between the 'content' of the study and the 'form' used for the purposes of representation is generally absent in such attempts. This meta-reflection is particularly lacking in projects that include experimental techniques such as drawing,² painting, sculpture, installations and so on, in comparison to works that make use of photography and video. That is to say, the expressive potential of art is not explored in any depth, revealing an underlining assumption on the superiority of anthropological epistemology over artistic research. In the same way, research-led projects coming from the world of art that call themselves ethnographic, systematically lack an anthropological theorizing. In short, while art and anthropology are often associated, one of the two is often simply accompanying the other, as if it were an interesting experiment, usually lacking in meaningful reflection on the methods and possibilities of both disciplines and their potential to develop any interconnectedness.

This essential epistemological fracture between art and anthropology is particularly evident in those cases in which artistic works are created by collaborating artists rather than by the researcher themselves.³ While photography and video-making are historically established tools in the hands of anthropologists, and many reflections have been carried on the partiality of vision and the way in which the camera lens selects and shapes reality from the eyes of the researcher,⁴ it is not yet clear how collaborative works can reflect the ethnographer's point of view when they are created by others. It is now time to further explore the practice of the researchers creating such works by themselves and, more importantly, to speculate on the ways in which these artefacts can produce significant theoretical contribution to anthropology. In this chapter, I address this debate, noting that it has already been invited by both critics in the fields of art and anthropology.⁵

I argue that the anthropologist-artist should reflect upon and explain how it is in each case study that the chosen form of representation contributes to shaping the content, that is how the visual works add theoretical information to the research. In this way, I draw from a concept that I have called elsewhere 'art-tool' (Tiné 2019), by which I refer to visual work that acts not only as an illustrative tool but also as an important instrument of research,

providing significant contributions to anthropological enquiry by enriching the specific research themes explored. The researcher should reflect on their own role as an artist, to give the reader a sense of how they are using the selected creative methods, and how they situate themselves in the peculiar context of each research project. Drawing from the Greimasian notion of plastic and figurative components in visual arts (meaning the content and the form expressed through lines, colours and spatial organization; see Greimas 1989), I argue that the authorial 'voice' of the anthropologist-artist should also involve a meta-reflection over plastic representation. That is, the visual expedients used to express certain ideas should be made clear, and the author should explain if and how these visual methods have contributed to their own understanding.

Through this endeavour, it is possible to depart from a mere illustrative approach to art towards one that adds something new to traditional research methods, namely an interpretation, expressed visually by the researcher. To demonstrate these points, I will briefly discuss some case studies from my doctoral studies in Nepal, in which I explore domestic conflictuality and transitioning notions of love and parenting through the application of selected visual semiotic constructs, drawing from both explicit local and Western visual epistemologies. Before that, however, it is important to understand the role of interpretation and representation in modern anthropology and to reflect on the role of the anthropologist as an author, as proposed by Clifford Geertz (1988).

The art of anthropology

The crisis of representation

At the beginning of the anthropological discipline, visual methodologies such as photography and video were used as scientific evidence, an assumption that was challenged from 1930, with increasing debate over the partiality of photographic images constructed by the maker (see e.g. Harper 1998). Simultaneously, the idea of anthropology as a 'positivistic' discipline started to be questioned. In the late 1980s, Marcus and Fisher ([1986] 1999) coined the term of 'crisis of representation' to account for the inadequacy of ethnography and how it had been utilized so far to express the complexities of human social worlds. Thus, the problem of anthropology became a problem of expression, in which the researcher's authorial voice entered the very debate about the expressive possibilities of the discipline. This new reflexivity, which was encouraged by the spread of feminist and postcolonial studies, became a crucial element in Clifford Geertz' speculation on the notion of 'writerly identity' (1988: 7).

According to Clifford Geertz, ‘anthropology should be seen as a kind of text in which the anthropologist is a creative author’ (Tiné 2021a: 59). The construction of the ‘writerly identity’ (Geertz 1988: 9) can be problematic due to the epistemological preoccupation to ‘prevent subjective views from colouring objective facts’ (1988: 7). For Geertz, the resistance to the notion of authorial voice was 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’. According to him, these resistances need to be overcome to develop an anthropology as ‘comparable art’ (1988: 139–140). Geertz’ proposal marked the epistemological passage of anthropology from a scientific discipline to an interpretative one. The problem of expression can thus be seen as pertaining to the transition from data collection to elaboration, interpretation and representation.

The anthropologist-author becomes an artist when artistic methods of expression are used. In this endeavour, a ‘responsibility’ of expression arises. That is, visual methods in anthropology involve the same expressive questions encountered in both artistic and anthropological fields, and the researcher has the responsibility to explore how these intertwine not only in practice but also in theory.

In and out of the field

Visual methods in the field can include the use of drawings in diaries, video and photography for data collection; portraiture of interviewees;⁶ photograph elicitation (Collier and Collier 1986); and delegation of the camera to the informants.⁷ On the other hand, the use of visual methods in post-fieldwork generally consists of documentary video productions, photographic reports, and installations. After the fieldwork, the researcher has to analyse the data and produce insights from the acquired information, thus adding an interpretation. The passage from the rough material to a meaningful text, through theoretical sampling and comparative literature analysis is the most difficult part of anthropological research, and probably the most misunderstood (Banks 2008; Mac Dougall 1997). As I observed elsewhere, ‘this is the passage from ethnography, seen as the collection of material and data in the field, to anthropology per se,⁸ seen as the analysis, interpretation and presentation of the research material’ (Tiné 2021a: 59). This needs to be accomplished in a way to ‘convince the reader that we have understood other “forms of life”, showing that we have truly been there’ (Geertz 1988: 4).

Post-fieldwork productions are not only the equivalent of raw data but also re-created with specific communicative intentions, to serve the anthropological need of expression and communication of findings. While this endeavour can be seen in ethnographic documentary making, in

which the editing process necessarily involves the analytical effort of the maker, visual arts, such as drawing and painting, have not received the same theoretical and practical dedication and have more commonly been used in the field as a part of the note-taking process. While a selection of these images in the ensuing analysis and dissemination is already a kind of analysis, the creation of new visual work, and a reflection on how this communicates relevant insights that contribute to the text and not simply accompany it, is not yet common in anthropology. In the next section, I will explore the notion of voice as encompassing interpretation and positionality and offer some insights on how we can add reflexivity within the process of expression.

The authorial voice

The notion of voice in anthropology is recurrent in the reflection on interpretative authority and in the relation between the researcher and the people that are researched. As noted by Appadurai (1988: 16–17):

much fieldwork is organized talk, and the ethnographic text is the more or less creative imposition of order on the many conversations that lie at the heart of fieldwork. But in fieldwork there is a curious double ventriloquism. While one part of our traditions dictates that we be the transparent medium for the voices of those we encounter in the field, that we speak for the native point of view, it is equally true that we find in what we hear some of what we have been taught to expect by our own training, reading, and cultural backgrounds. Thus our informants are often made to speak for us.

That is to say, the authorial voice involves an interpretation in which positionality plays a crucial role. This refers to the ways in which the researcher's background affects their perspective, but also their relationship with the informants. Anthropologists nowadays agree that interpretation derives from this encounter of epistemological 'positions'.

In artistic enquiry, the search for an artist's voice generally refers to the unique style of an artist. However, artists also acknowledge that the voice changes according to the object. This was, for example, a reflection made in 1923 by Pablo Picasso, who said 'whenever I had something to say, I have said it in the manner in which I have felt it ought to be said. Different motives inevitably require different methods of expression' (quoted in Chipp 1968: 265). Following this line of thought, it is the responsibility of the anthropologist-artist to carry a meta-reflection on the link between content and the form chosen for expression, a link that should be made clear from the author to the viewer.

Plastic representation

The concept of plastic representation helps us to reflect on two questions: Which technique/style is used to express what? And, consequently, what does art add to the specific theme discussed? In Greimas's elaboration of analytical tools for visual semiotics, composition, lines and colours (followed by a topologic, eidetic and chromatic description) are the most relevant plastic aspects, which serve to express the figurative element (see Greimas 1989). Drawing from this approach, we can move forward to encompass other aspects and embrace all of the expressive potential of art. Some operative examples include the use of black and white; different genres (portrait, graphic novel or others formats and mediums); plastic elements such as colours, lines and texture; and even pictorial styles such as expressionism, impressionism and so on. All of these choices follow a culture-shaped and author-made expression, in which the underlying referent for interpretation should be made clear.

This meta-reflection should not be taken as discouraging spontaneity in creative work. That is, spontaneity can be an important aspect in the construction of the authorial voice in a given study, and follow-up reflections can reveal important insights to the artist themselves. These reflections should also be included in an accompanying discussion to the artworks. Even 'chance' in the making process can be used and explained, although images with a very low figurative gradient (using the Greimas scale), could have less expressive power in relation to the studied subject. However, if reading guidelines are provided, this can also be useful. Think for example of abstractism to express specific emotions. That is, there is no limit to creativity and these notes are only suggestions for the anthropologist-artist who will want to experiment along the lines of visual practice and anthropological research. Nevertheless, the interpretation of visual work remains open, so that it can be influenced by the viewer's background and individual perspectives (Ricoeur 1973). However, clarity by the author is crucial, and this is the main difference between an artist and anthropologist-artist. When embracing this expressive responsibility, the anthropologist-artist can bring the discipline forward, departing significantly from a merely illustrative function.

One example of an author that has consistently been reflecting on the link between content and form is Lydia Nakashima Degarrod. She has made use of the surrealist technique of frottage to provide a visual account of the dreaming process of her informants (Nakashima Degarrod 2020b) and of the situationist technique of drifting to unveil the emotional components of walking without purpose in a city (Nakashima Degarrod 2020a). I will now discuss some case studies from my doctoral studies in Social Anthropology and Development Studies which are included and discussed in a forthcoming volume entitled *The Art of Modernity* (Tiné n.d.).⁹

Case studies from *The Art of Modernity*

Overview

Based on fifteen-months of ethnographic fieldwork research conducted in the Newar¹⁰ town of Bhaktapur in 2018 to 2019, *The Art of Modernity* (Tiné n.d.) traces the material, social and ideological basis of the emergence of a Newar middle class from the Jyapu caste of farmers and explores changing domestic relations in the context of larger societal transformations with a focus on the shaping of moral selves and the negotiations of relatedness and conflict. It asks the question: How are Newar middle-class people revising domestic relations and moralities in the context of changing material conditions of life and ideological transformations? How are new pressures and aspirations made to coexist with Indigenous moralities and cosmologies? Drawing from ethnographic data collected amongst more than one hundred households, I investigated how local notions of morality have become embedded into an emic discourse on the notion of modernity and class, and how this is linked to transformations in the domestic sphere.¹¹

As a part of this project, drawing from my background as both a visual artist and an anthropologist, I attempted to put into practice the representation of the ‘world of lived experience’ (Ingold 2011) 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. First of all, a combination of drawing and painting is a methodology that I have chosen in order to create a dialogue with the larger context of the study. This study is situated in a fast-changing society in which Nepali people reflect on the theme of morality by relating it to emic notions of modernity and tradition. Here, it is as if people were building themselves as an artist shapes their artwork. This is the metaphor from which I draw on to use art in the ethnographic enquiry. The idea of the ‘self’ making itself in a reflexive process draws from the concept of the ‘painter of modern life’ by Baudelaire ([1964] 1978). According to Foucault (1986: 14), for Baudelaire, ‘modernity is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself’, where ‘to be modern is not to accept oneself as one in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration’ ([1964] 1978: 14). That is to say, the modern person ‘makes their body, their behaviour, their feelings and passions, their very existence, a work of art’ (14–15). As such, ‘modernity does not “liberate man in his own being”; it compels him to face the task of producing himself’ (15).

For the varying topics explored, I used several techniques that occasionally intertwined with each other according to the theme. I have used the *non*

finito (unfinished) technique to communicate domestic relations as involved in a process of becoming; the *chiaroscuro* technique to provide a visual account of conflictuality; and the local metaphor of the wife as the mirror of the husband to explore transitioning emic notions of love. I will discuss these in further detail in the next sections.

Case study 1: Parenting and the unfinished

Following the end of the Rana regime in 1951, the introduction of a money economy in Nepal and the affirmation of new ideologies led to the emergence of a middle class in Bhaktapur and of a new consumer society. The possibility of acquiring and spending cash started both creating new needs and supporting new consumer desires and imagined lives, using an expression by Appadurai (1990: 296). In people's accounts, the notion of 'better lives' is a perspective that significantly departs from the memory of their past lives and was a recurrent theme.

The possibility of providing a better life to one's children through hard work and investing in education becomes a new epistemology of the future, nevertheless coexisting with the persisting epistemological narrative of the *samsara*.¹² In the exploration of the concept of better lives, I examined transitioning parents-children relations, highlighting how these have transitioned from the concept of respect as submission to respect as equality, in which understanding and respect of each other's opinion is valued. To convey the unfolding of lives within the tension towards better lives, I used the unfinished as an aesthetic communicating the sense of becoming. In so doing, I explored not only parents-children relations but also the condition of the elderly who are left behind and the formation of romantic bonds. I employed an array of stylistic expedients including leaving some drawing lines visible, the blurring of boundaries between masses and the use of colour dropping. Additionally, I used my own fieldnotes to communicate the process of analysis involved in the understanding of the studied society as a process of thick description involving ethnography and reflection. Ultimately, the aesthetic of the unfinished is recurrent in both anthropological and artistic literature to signify a process of becoming, particularly on the theme of becoming itself. Therefore, this communicates with pre-existing scholarly and artistic debate on the topic.¹³

Case study 2: Chiaroscuro and conflict

By adopting a feminist approach to the study of the household, I examined the ongoing phenomenon of household fission to explore changing moralities and relations in the making of nuclear families in Bhaktapur. I investigated why conflict leads to separation and why separation is generally occurring

through conflict. I suggest that the reason for this can be found in the increased importance of the nuclear family among a growing middle class, which in turn causes alienation of the elderly. In Figure 1.1, and Figure 1.2, I have attempted to express this sense of strengthening of the bond between members of nuclear families, while in Figure 1.3 I elaborate on the sense of abandonment experienced by the elderly. To account for the contrasting perspectives and issues that feature the daily lives of people in the context of the joint household, I used 'chiaroscuro' (from the Italian words *chiaro*: light and *scuro*: dark), an artistic technique that builds enlightened scenes in dark settings, which has been explored by painters such as Caravaggio and Rembrandt. In stark contrast to the brightness of Renaissance paintings, their use of chiaroscuro provoked the viewer to immerse themselves in unrevealed meanings and introspection.

One of my key informants, Maya, rebelled against the social hierarchy and gender roles in a large joint household, and following a mental breakdown she was said to be possessed by evil spirits.¹⁴ In Plate 1.3, inspired by the sixteenth-century penitent Magdalene, I represent the moment in which Maya, having become pregnant, decided to leave the joint household. Drawing from this visual construction, chiaroscuro evokes here the self-reflexivity as well as the conflict and contrasts going on in the life of the person represented.



FIGURE 1.1 Paola Tiné, 'Family at a restaurant', pen on paper. 2021.

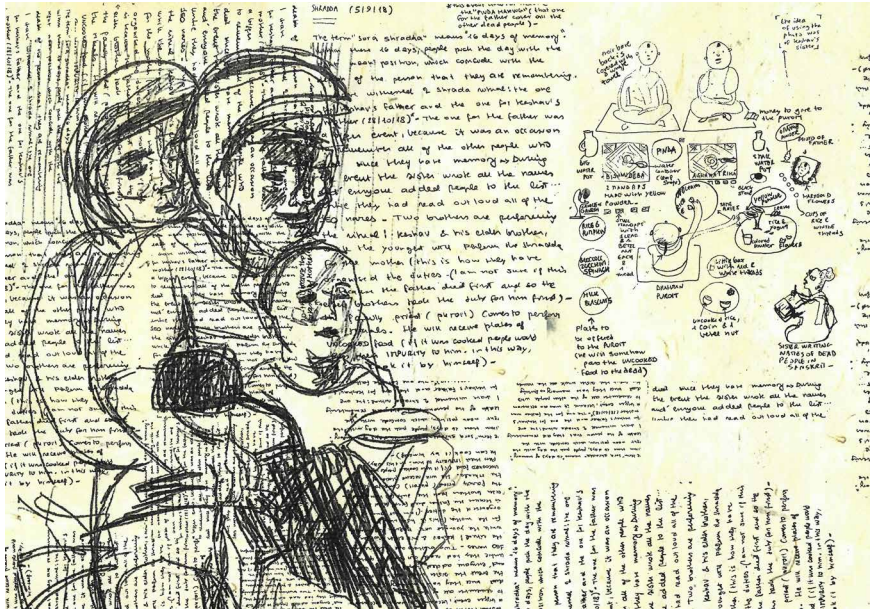


FIGURE 1.2 Paola Tiné, 'Family on a motorbike and field notes on the topic of a ritual of commemoration for a dead father (shradha ritual)', pen on paper. 2021.

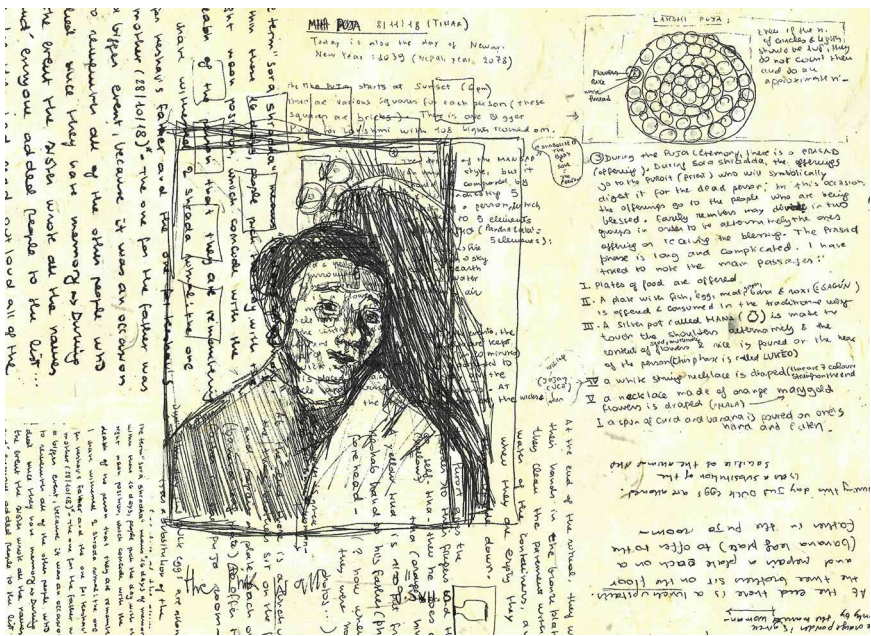


FIGURE 1.3 Paola Tiné, 'Left behind', pen on paper. 2021.

Case study 3: Love and the metaphor of the mirror

Ideas of love as intimacy and reciprocal understanding are a recurrent topic in people’s reflections on marriage and modernity. However, arranged marriages are still preferred, based on economic and social considerations (including caste), and love is more generally sought after marriage (although with different connotations from person to person). To explore transitioning notions of love in Nepal, I employed the local metaphor of ‘the wife as a mirror of the husband’ and transposed it into a visual representation. Local people say that if the husband dies, the wife ‘will have no face’, wherein the face is a metaphor for social status. As a visual metaphor, I used the image of the mirror to express the subordination of the wife to the husband. Additionally, the mirror is a relatively new element in Nepali imaginary, which was introduced in the nineteenth century and soon became a synonym of modernity and lifestyle (Liechty 1997: 54) and as this emic metaphor testifies, also becoming part of a local imaginary which was added to pre-existing social codes. The technique of the unfinished was useful in this context to provide a visual representation of the making of romantic webs as a process of mutual understanding (*aapasi samajdari*).



FIGURE 1.4 Paola Tiné, ‘Love grows with time’, pen on paper. 2019.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite the fact that the use of visual methodologies has become somewhat of a tendency in academic research in recent years, a reflection on the links between the theoretical messages and their creative expression is often missing. In this chapter, taking from Geertz' notion of the anthropologist as an author, I argued that the same process of analysis and reflexive representation conducted in written anthropology should be carried out by the anthropologist-artist when artistic methods of representation are used as a form of anthropological enquiry.

I reflected on the production of art during the post-fieldwork phase as a tool of analysis and expression of insights, following a process that is akin to the transition from ethnography to anthropological writing. By discussing the role of the anthropologist-artist, I suggested that the authorial voice should encompass a reflection on the positionality of the researcher, as well as on the plastic expedients put into practice for the means of expression of specific contents, and possibly clarify how these methods have enhanced the researcher's own understanding. To demonstrate these points, I discussed selected case studies from my doctoral studies in Nepal.

In exploring the making of moral selves in Nepal, the larger visual project from which I have extracted the images showed in this chapter (see Tiné n.d.) contributes to the understanding of a local experience of development, providing added insights to the emotional nuances of the shaping of relatedness occurring among middle-class people. For example, the images proposed in this chapter have shown how the transformation of ideas about 'good parenting' follow the ideology of development, which is adapted by people to their domestic needs and desires. On the other hand, as revealed in the second case study, modernity also means increased conflictuality as a consequence of several factors including education, women's empowerment, new economic needs and the making of diverse moral judgements that are negotiated between private and public sensitivities. Furthermore, the third case study showed how spousal relations are changing, following the revision of ideas about love and intimacy, and the redefinition of what a 'moral marriage' and a 'moral spouse' is. This ongoing emic reflexivity is systematically challenging pre-existing moral stances, and the visual grammar of the unfinished, the chiaroscuro and the figurative metaphor of the mirror contribute to provide a sense of such revision of social codes. In closing, I particularly would like to draw the reader's attention to the image 'Hand in hand' (Plate 1.2), in which a father is seen walking from the back holding a child's hand. As I note in *The Art of Modernity* (Tiné n.d.):

This painting draws the viewer into the world of the people portrayed, as if they could follow them on the road they are traversing. Where they are

going, they only know. Between daily dreams, memories, muddy roads and blue skies, the path is yet to be defined. But it is also already here, in the holding of hands. It can be seen, as a flowing of lives and hopes from one heart to the other.

Thus, this work conveys the sense of being *in fieri*, depicted from their most intimate points of view, as suspended between the past and the present, in a process of giving and taking, in which they shape each other's moral selves while pursuing the path of development. Ultimately, the aim of these paintings is to contribute a more expressive understanding of a sociocultural system that is being revised by its members as creative agents rather than as passive recipients of developmental programmes and ideologies. Nevertheless, while in each of the case studies the methodologies underling the meaning-making process of the artworks were explained, the interpretation remains open to individual perspectives, which are shaped by the cultural and individual background of the viewer. While acknowledging this open-ended feature of the artistic work, the communicative responsibility of the artist-anthropologist is to provide additional reflection to the anthropological production. The development of such reflections was in my case also crucial for developing ethnographic analysis and for the subsequent writing phase. Consequently, I invite scholars working at the intersection between ethnography and visual methods to experiment along these lines of research.

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Notes

- 1 Scholars have given various interpretations of what can art express better than words. Some have suggested the topic of religion and spirituality (Dunlop and Dadrowska 2008; Morgan 2005; Williams 2015), political fight (Pinney 2004) and habitus (Sweetman 2009: 491). I have personally written about the expression of emotions and states of mind known in philosophy as *qualia* (Tiné 2017) and the concept of modern self (Tiné 2021a).

- 2 Drawing has been used in ethnographic enquiry as a part of data collection since the beginning of the discipline. Here I refer to the use of drawing made as a production that explicitly adds theoretical insights to the enquiry.
- 3 See for example Laine (2018) and Pink (2007).
- 4 For a discussion on this, see Knowles and Sweetman (2004).
- 5 See for example the criticism by art critic Hal Foster (1995: 306) and visual anthropologist Fadwa El Guindi (2011: 678).
- 6 See for example the work of Zoe Bray, who uses realistic portraiture of informants as a process of ‘thick description’ (Bray 2015).
- 7 Some researchers have used this method to achieve a representation of the informant’s point of view (Bai 2007; Ginzburg 1995).
- 8 For a distinction between ethnography and anthropology see Ingold (2008).
- 9 This visual account is an addendum to my doctoral dissertation (Tiné 2022). In previous works, I have started reflecting on how visual elements communicate in relation to contents, for example in an experimental work on the city life in my early university studies (Tiné 2019), which I also presented in the form of an art exhibition in Siena in 2014.
- 10 The Newars are the ancient inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal.
- 11 For similar approaches to emic modernity and class as a cultural practice see Liechty (2003) and Pigg (1993).
- 12 The *samsara*, meaning in Sanskrit ‘the ever-turning wheel of life’, is the Hindu belief in metempsychosis, a continuous process of reincarnation towards the final release (*moksha*). A person’s reincarnation in a higher or lower state of existence corresponds to past deeds in their previous life (*karma*).
- 13 See for example contemporary artists such as William Kentridge, Albert Oehlen and Michael Krebber. For anthropological work along these lines, see Biehl and Locke (2017).
- 14 For a more extensive discussion on this case study see Tiné (2021a).

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PLATE 1.1 Paola Tiné, 'Mother and children', oil and pencils on paper 2020.



PLATE 1.2 Paola Tiné, 'Hand in hand', oil on paper 2019.



PLATE 1.3 Paola Tiné, 'Maya by candlelight with yomari plate', oil on canvas and words added digitally, 2020.

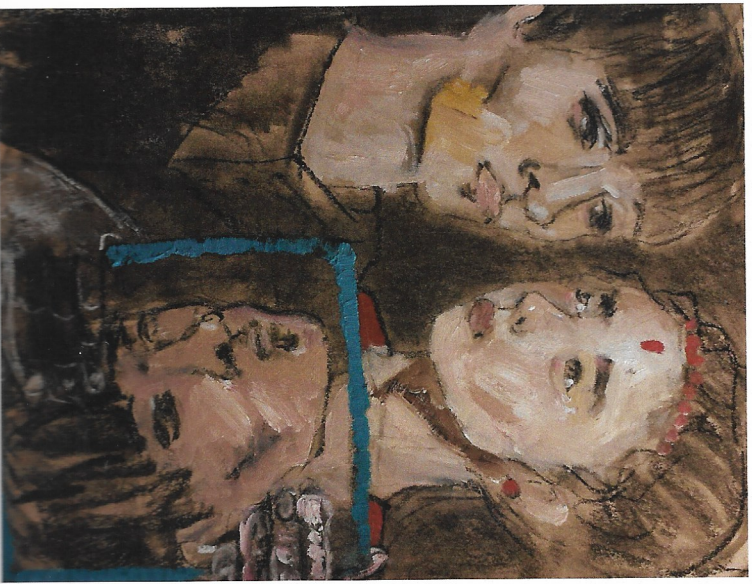


PLATE 1.4 Paola Tiné, 'The mirror of the husband', charcoal and oil on paper, 2021.