

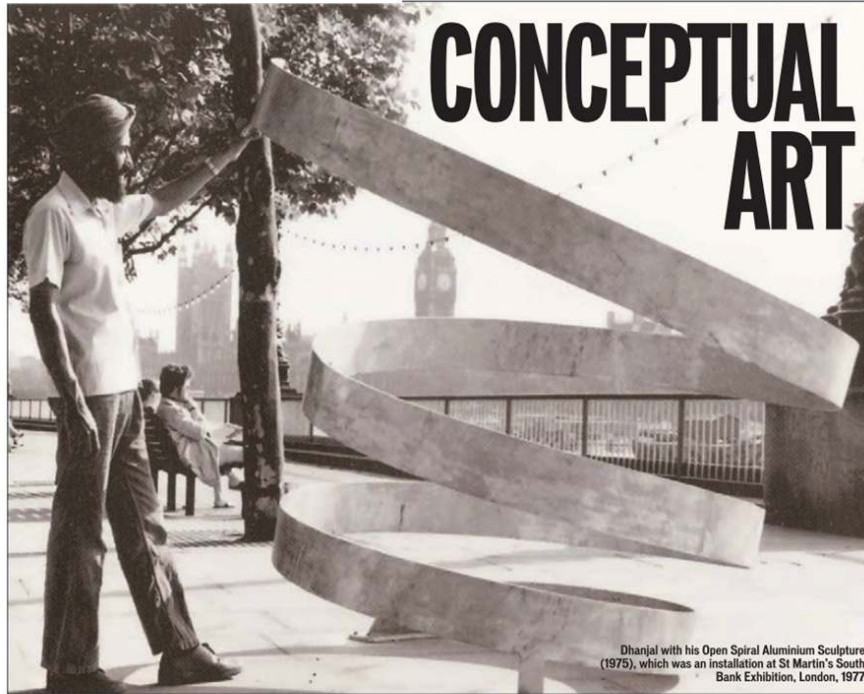
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CONCEPTUAL ART

Dhanjal with his Open Spiral Aluminium Sculpture (1975), which was an installation at St Martin's South Bank Exhibition, London, 1977

A modern artist and sculptor, his sculptures in aluminium, stone, fire and slate – which he says are about creating a concept rather than an object – have decorated public places across the globe. Jyoti Sharma talks to Avtarjeet Dhanjal about his versatile work



His installation made of oakwood and concrete called Wayside Well (1982) at a park in Krki, Slovenia

Twenty-four hours — that's all the time we have in a day. We follow our banal routine and sometimes crib about the scarcity of time. But some skillfully steal time and manage and reproduce it. "You should know how to steal time and make a loop of this stolen time. And in that loop of stolen time, you vent your creativity. Otherwise, you'll always be a prisoner to the norms of society and its expectations," says Avtarjeet Dhanjal, a sculptor from Punjab, who resides in Ironbridge, England.

The modern artist experiments with various materials like aluminium, stone, fire and slate to construct his sculptures, which he has installed at various public venues all around the world. Born in 1940 in village Dalla, Ludhiana district, Dhanjal, the son of a carpenter, start-

ed out as a sign-painter, but always wanted to explore the world of art. He went to Delhi where he struggled as an artist and then shifted to Chandigarh to study at the Government College of Art from 1965-1970. He began to experiment with clay, plaster, wood, stone and finally aluminium.

The artist is disgruntled by the existing education system in India. "The current system of education in India does not encourage pupils to reason. We curb their cognitive abilities by giving them orders. Students cram and reproduce — this type of education system was deliberately developed by the British administration to keep colonies under control. They did want us to progress mentally. And, unfortunately, we are still following it," he says.

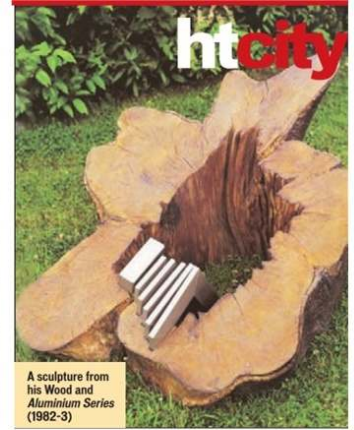
After completing his education in India, Dhanjal sold

his work to the Chandigarh Museum and Lalit Kala Akademi in Delhi, before travelling to Africa in 1971 where he secured a lectureship at the University of Nairobi. He continued to pursue his creative work and was invited to exhibit his sculptures in London in 1973. A year later, he moved to England permanently and began studying at St Martin's School of Art, London.

He says he wasn't easily accepted in the West. The British art scene appeared to him as if "under a glass bowl, visually accessible but unreachable". But being a student of St Martin's helped. "I could finally make my place in the UK — otherwise, I would have been painting images of goddesses like most Indian artists here," he says.

His first major solo exhibition was in 1974 at Pitsanger Manor and Gallery, London, which reflected his art school education at Chandigarh and St Martin's to his large-scale slate sculptures. He went on to create countless pieces of public art works in the form of sculptures, which have been installed at various places around the world.

"An artist works on intuition, which is beyond logic. I try to create a feeling rather than an object," explains 71-year-old Dhanjal. "Once, when I visited Montserrat (near Barcelona) in Spain, I climbed a big rock and felt the sky caress my skin. I felt like this big blue umbrella was embracing me and this feeling stayed with me." The artist recreated this sentiment through his installation *Wayside Well* (1982) for the 'Forma Viva' International Symposium of Sculpture in Kostanjevica na Krki, Slovenia. "I was asked to cre-



A sculpture from his Wood and Aluminium Series (1982-3)

ate something in a park, so I visited the park and asked myself what it needed. I saw a group of children — there was no place for them to sit. I was reminded of my childhood when we would rest under the shade of a tree. So, I recreated this memory in the form of a well made from oakwood and concrete and I created some seating around this well," he recalls.

Over the years, he experimented with aluminium, stone and wood. In 1983, he began to experiment with slate and fire. He used flames for his installation *83 Steps* for Margam Sculpture Park, Wales, after he learnt about the combustion system of gas and designed his own burners, during his residency at North Eastern Gas (NEGAS — part of the British Gas Corporation) at their training college in Leeds, as part of an Artist-in-Industry project. His first sculpture at NEGAS, *Flame Line Pyramid*, was a sand pyramid with a flame ribbon running from top to

bottom on one side. "I believe in creating concepts not objects," he says, matter-of-factly.

And, these concepts are inspired by his surroundings. In 1990, he floated 5,000 candles in a small lake in São Luis, Brazil. "When I landed in Brazil, I was distressed to see the large number of homeless children in the country. I wanted to work for their cause, so I floated these candles. Each candle represented a child," says Dhanjal, who also helped to raise money for these children.

His future plans include the set up of an innovation centre in Punjab. "Creativity is not restricted to making sculptures and other art. It's also about coming up with creative ways to solve problems.

These can be software, architectural or even biological problems. I am putting together a team of experts who will provide solutions to various problems," he informs.



Dhanjal, with a book that was published in 1997 on his journey as an artist