
Jogen Chowdhury

Andrew L. Cohen

Not a new or recent phenomenon, violence once again is ripping India's fragile republic. In a frenzy of ignorance and hatred people flail out at other people. The mayhem of course is global and ubiquitous, occurring everywhere from Gujrat to New York to Bali. Violence explodes in seemingly random convulsions, often in the name of religion and armed sometimes with insidious political justification, but the grief and sorrow is felt most acutely at home.

Is it any surprise then that some of the recent works of an artist as skillful and sensitive as Jogen Chowdhury are anguished? While much of the exhibition is composed of works echoing Chowdhury's past themes, the recent tempestuous works are most striking to me. As we look at the paintings and see the torn flesh and body parts, how can we not feel uncomfortable? Though images show gaping and gruesome wounds, they are unquestionably absorbing. How can we look away? For instance, his series of paintings, "*Faces in Agony*" portray the essence of agony and burning anger. Though diminutive in scale (7.5 " by 9"), they are visually monumental and sublime. Here lies the viewer's dilemma. These paintings are disturbing yet engrossing. Leaving us repelled by the insane behavior they display; they yet make us marvel at their masterly technique and aesthetic virtuosity.

Though Chowdhury's paintings reverberate with emotions universally felt, he does not seek to be a global voice raised against injustice. He is grounded in his regional Bengali identity and comfortable with his own artistic manner. Throughout his career Chowdhury has scrutinized, even satirized, his local environment. He has lived through the most turbulent years of India's history, from partition to today, and has survived to be one of the dominant artists of his generation. While almost opposites in artistic and personal temperament, Chowdhury (b. 1939) and Bhupen Khakhar (b. 1934) stand out as the most penetrating social critics among their coevals. Younger artists should feel indebted to their achievements.

While images of bodily violence dominate this exhibit, it also includes paintings of human warmth, of hope and need. Couples have long been a recurring theme in Chowdhury's repertoire; and against the backdrop of mangled bodies it is refreshing to ponder "*Surrendered*". In his distinctive cross-hatching and linear style, we see a

couple intimately depicted. Figures solidly and boldly outlined, with rubbery bodies of muted gray and brown, the male reclines and reaches out to the crouching female at his side. How content he appears with his wide smile and extended hand. However, like so many of Chowdhury's works, the painting suggests an interaction more complicated than blissful union. The contortion of the female is overstated; especially her low bowed head. Is she willingly submitting to his male authority (as a good Indian wife should)? But she is oversized in relation to him, occupying at the same time a good two-thirds of the painting, and the effect is to give her a certain dominance over him. As is the case with most couple representations in Chowdhury's art, this is a complex relationship between genders that is in flux and constant need of negotiation. There is an incongruity and incommensurable feeling in this work that is at war with its harmony. This dialectic, typical of Chowdhury's paintings, is just one aspect of his art that makes it so worthy of contemplation.

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