
Jogen Chowdhury Pearls in the Mud

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East Bengal-born Jogen Chowdhury spent his early childhood in the dark refugee colonies of South Calcutta. He recalls his notions of 'political consciousness' which were not so uncommon among the Bengalis. But this Calcutta temperament cast a permanent gloom on his psyche. He did not want to accept the past on its own grounds. In 1969 he wrote an essay: "Tradition shouldn't be repeated, we should learn from it". In 1973 his exhibition catalogue emphasised the same facts: "We need new sounds, not echoes of existing art". This has remained the driving force behind Jogen's creativity as he has consciously worked to carve a niche for himself.

A first class first from the Government College of Arts and Crafts, Calcutta, was a promising start, but the blue-eyed boy remained 'directionless'. A scholarship to Paris broke the ice. That was a sudden and bizarre exposure and his disorientation was so serious that Jogen remembers, "In Paris I could not get any image to paint. I had a peculiar attachment to India and I couldn't detach myself." This restlessness expressed itself in an abstract Expressionism. Later, Paris put the artist at ease. He has since participated in seven shows in France, and two of his Indian shows were held at the Alliance Francaise in Madras and Calcutta.

The sudden contrast, particularly of the social problems surrounding him on his return to India, disturbed the artist. While Paris saw the breakthrough in the technique of painting, the search for "something different, something avoiding the influences of others" began only in India. Jogen's continuing interest in people and their conditions appeared on his canvases. This was when his figures were distorted and the lines exaggerated to drive the message home.

Surely human beings deserved a better life, Jogen felt. For a while, he didn't paint, he wrote. While working for the Handloom Board in Madras he turned out a hundred page treatise on art. Although his answer was not to be in words, this did provide a temporary retreat. Slowly the brushes and colours returned. It is ironic that the painting style evolved by Jogen still makes great use of the pen. Besides a frenzy of hectic penwork, Jogen's recent paintings have large flat expanses of black ink soaking the paper.

Sparseness of colour

The colour in Jogen's works are few. This choice of 'muddy' colours seems the

only outlet for a chronic depressant. And that is how the artist has seen himself in moments of self-analysis. He recalls his early days of painting with a hurricane lantern (Electricity came much later in the south calcutta colony where youth was spent after the family had migrated from East Bengal). "I don't experiment with colour or surface," says Jogen, clear in his mind about the purpose of his work. Human problems interest him more than the purely aesthetic, which according to him are solved 'automatically'. As he paints with conviction, his muddy colours do not dull the message. On the contrary, when the water is turbid with mud, the fish's eyes are pearls!

A recent work 'Nati Binodini' makes his point clear. This study of a Bengali Prostitute-turned-actress (a contemporary of Ramkrishna Paramhansa) is subtly seductive in her eyes and lips. The actress had tried to build a facade for her tarnished image. She had visions of being accepted in society, but with no success. Her accentuated breasts, however, tell the real story, burying the contrived refinement in an instant vulgarity. Aesthetics are not compromised in the line work and painting of the subject, but more significantly for the artist, nor his message concealed behind painterly gimmicks.

In another recent work titled "The Preacher", a naked man sits with his back to the viewer. The large body dwarfs the head, not without its metaphorical connotations. The spine is bent and a clumsy hand raised with much effort to preach a hollow sermon.

Jogen goes further. He is both an atheist and an iconoclast. And these socially 'unaccepted' tendencies don't remain subtly personal. They consciously go public in his large works of art, created in defiance of a world that lets tradition invade its value system without putting it through contemporary tests. Cross hatching and stippling with his pen, Jogen demolishes the haloes around the gods. Ganesha, the gurdian of the portal who is invoked before the other gods, is first to be exposed. Jogen's Ganesha, obese and gangling, ages with the mortals. His bones diswon his flesh, let it sag. His genitals are flaccid impotent. Two of his arms raised to assert himself while two others hold the Gita. But the eyeballs turn skyward, making a mockery of his reading. His nails are bitten down with nervousness. This satire is not just academic derision.

Erotic undercurrent

Erotica is another important undercurrent in Jogen's work. One of his mixed media drawings, which resembled a large, dangling phallus, drew much attention. This, the artist explained, was only a rolled bedding on his terrace. However, he doesn't

disown the fact that the 'sensuousness' was intentional. Serpents and fish appear often in his work, recalling the rubbery intestinal shapes of his dreams. Breasts seem a less engaging obsession. Far from luscious and fruit like, they appear squashed and lifeless, as in the painting called 'Tiger in the moonlight'.

Politicians and intellectuals too don't escape Jogen: a minister is caricatured sucking his finger, an intellectual is symbolised by a square pumpkin.

It is interesting to note that Jogen is qualified in the realistic genre and a part of his work as curator of paintings at the Rastrapati Bhavan is to restore the damaged or aged classics of the masters. Besides this close contact, a wide exposure to the masterpieces in Europe's museums led Jogen to give them their due place in the President's collection. Many English portraits had been removed from places where they came under public gaze and had been stacked in the storerooms. Jogen collaborated with Begum Abida Ali, when she was the First Lady, and arranged these beautiful portraits in the grand Marble Gallery, a colonnaded hall that brings Giorgio de Chirico's work to mind. The whole effect—chequered marble and Kotha stone floors, fountains and baroque gilded frames, giant canvases and busts in ceremonial attire—is one of an era prereserved from history.

In his own work, Jogen has, however, chosen to distort his lines to achieve a certain 'freedom', to convey a purity of sensation if not of line. Having arrived at a successful personal style, its eccentricities help avoiding the danger of aesthetics and make his message strong and valid.

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